

EARLY CHRISTIAN ART: THE BASIS FOR A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH
TO CHRISTOLOGY THROUGH SYMBOLISM

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Doctor of Religion

by
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Christological Problem

In its literal sense, christology may be defined very simply as the "doctrine of the Christ." In its relation to Jesus as the Christ it has two essential aspects. First, christology as a perception or apprehension of Jesus as the Christ belongs inherently to the realm of faith. Christological statements are therefore "faith statements"; they witness to the faith of belief of the individual or community asserting them. On the other hand, christology is also an aspect of the history of the Christian Church. In this sense, the christological statements are doctrinal statements; they reflect the doctrine and the traditions of the Church as a Christian institution.

In either case, christology is inherently and essentially related to symbolic language and imagery. Indeed, there seems to be a reciprocal relationship which exists between christology and symbolism. One's symbols develop out of and reflects his christology, but one's symbols also influence and determine the shape of his christology. This results in what might be termed a "christological dilemma." What symbols are to be used to express christological truths? From what sources are these christological symbols to be

derived and by what means? By what criteria are they to be evaluated?

The most frequent approach to a study of christology has been in terms of a philosophical-theological orientation. Beginning with the New Testament records, especially those of the Gospels, or the early writings of the Church fathers, there has been a serious effort to derive from them a relevant and consistent christology. Although such studies do utilize symbols and symbolic language in their attempts at understanding, the primary focus is the endeavor to "demythologize" or to interpret the symbols in terms of the perceived existential needs. A wide continuum may be established in this respect. At one end of this continuum is the 'Jesus of history' movement and the attempt to discover or uncover the man behind the symbols. In this process the symbols are analyzed and explained in terms of their origin and meaning. At the other end of the continuum is the 'Christ of faith' presentation and the attempt to confront and interpret the myths and symbols of Jesus as the Christ. Obviously, there are many varied positions and degrees between the two extremes. Thus, it is possible to discuss the authenticity or validity of the christologies which result from these presentations. These discussions generally are based on the same approach as is their fundamental methodology, namely a philosophical-theological one.

The Purposes of this Study

This study approaches the problem from a fundamentally different orientation. There is an equally relevant approach to the study of christology which is in contrast to the one described above and is grounded in a different methodology. Its primary 'model' or starting point is from an artistic and symbolic orientation and structure rather than that of the philosophical and theological. It is more concerned with the visual than with the verbal, with the symbolic than with the conceptual, and with the concrete than with the abstract. Although it is concerned with theology and theological understandings in terms of their christological expressions, its approach to christology is from a symbolic rather than a philosophic perspective.

It is not my purpose to develop a new christology. In fact, this study presupposes the validity of already existing christologies without attempting to evaluate them. My purpose has two dimensions. First, to examine what I consider to be a fundamental and authentic source of christological understandings which is essentially symbolic in its expressions. The source is that of the art forms of the early Christian community, specifically it is the art of the Roman catacombs. Second, to utilize the insights gained from the study of these symbolic expressions as a basis for a complementary approach to christology in the contemporary Church, one which is grounded in visual symbols rather than verbal conceptualizations. My thesis is that such symbols represent as viable a means for the understanding

and presentation of christological truths as does the philosophical-theological approach.

Thus, this study represents one particular approach to the problem of christological symbolism. It is primarily an attempt to present several significant issues in this area and to develop a direction in which a method of dealing with them can be found. However, its function does not include the presentation of ready-made answers to those issues. Christology, like theology, is, and must be, an open-ended process. The Church must continually re-formulate and re-express her answer to the basic question: How is Jesus of Nazareth also the Christ of our faith? No single answer will suffice for all time. Yet answers there must be. The thrust of this particular study is with the "where" and "how" of those answers rather than the "what."

The Plan of this Study

Chapters II and III of this study are concerned with the presentation of some basic information regarding the catacombs and their art. Such a beginning might raise a fundamental question in the reader's mind. Why the catacombs? Because these are a particularly significant source of christological symbolism. The symbols in the catacombs are essentially pictorial in nature in contrast to those in the New Testament and other Church writings which are verbal and abstract in their presentations. In addition, the art of the catacombs represents that form of early Christianity which can best be termed

"popular Christianity." At least this is the case in the earliest expressions of the art. The New Testament writings, and the Gospels are no exception, are highly theological both in structure and perspective. They reflect, if the term may be liberally used, what would be called "orthodox Christianity." They are in contradistinction to the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature of the New Testament period. These non-canonical writings, although they may be closer to the popular beliefs of the time, are still basically theological and philosophical in orientation. The catacomb expressions, on the other hand, fall somewhere between the two. Most certainly they are theological representations, but they are also extremely visual and graphic representations of the feelings and faith of the early community itself.

Obviously, the catacomb artisans were not solely concerned with christology per se. However, it was natural that this should be given prominent expression in their art, particularly in its understanding of the individual's hope for a life beyond death.

Since this is a strikingly neglected area of study, it seemed necessary to provide some general background against which the christological expressions might be viewed in perspective. This is essentially the purpose for these first two chapters. Included in them is an examination of the purposes, origin and general description of the catacombs as well as an examination of the primary motifs which their art reflects.

Chapter IV is concerned with catacomb christology specifically. The christology has been determined by means of a detailed analysis of three primary images or symbols which are utilized to represent the person and/or work of the Christ. These are: the Good Shepherd, the Miracle Worker and the Fish. This chapter also contains a brief mention of several significant omissions in the art as compared with the more traditional symbols as given in the New Testament, and especially in the Gospels. The basic purpose of this chapter is to present a picture of early christological symbolism.

The purpose of Chapter V is twofold. The first of these is directly related to the catacomb art and its symbols. The development and expressions of these symbols can offer specific insights into the role and form of christological symbolism in the contemporary Church. I would suggest, using these symbols as a basis, that there are specific "guidelines" or "criteria" which can be derived. These can then be applied to the formulation and evaluation of christological symbols in the modern Church. A process such as this is dependent upon a working knowledge of the fundamental relationship existing between religious faith and symbolic imagery. Tillich's statement gives an indication of the direction which such an understanding must take.

They (symbols) make accessible to our minds levels of experience from which we otherwise would be shut off; we would not be aware of them. This is the great function of symbols, to point beyond themselves in the power of that to which they point, to open up levels of reality

which otherwise are closed, and to open up levels of the human mind of which we otherwise are not aware.¹

This "beyondness" is of extreme importance. Thus it becomes possible to describe a symbol in terms of a "window." It is meant to be transparent so that one can see through it and beyond it to what is, in Tillich's words, "ultimately real."

The direction which I would suggest for the contemporary Church forms the second focus of Chapter V. It is an attempt to establish the basis for an approach to christology through symbolism and is primarily a "working out" of the thesis of this study.

The Needs Served by this Study

Such a study as offered in these chapters can have several valid justifications in terms of its relevance for the contemporary Church and its life. Catacomb art is a neglected aspect of our Christian heritage. It can add a great deal to our knowledge of the early Christian community in regard to its structure and its faith. It can also add to our own faith in that it offers a wealth of imagery and symbols to enrich and enhance it. Unfortunately, the majority of these studies in catacomb art are not in English. Moreover, that which is in English is quite old. Such a study as this one might serve to provide an impetus to others to do further work in this field. In this alone it has sufficient value.

¹Paul Tillich, "Theology and Symbolism," in F. Ernest Johnson (ed.), Religious Symbolism (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), p. 109.

However, there are other values as well. Harvey Cox has described man as "homo festivus" and "homo fantasia."² It is his conviction that man must express himself in both "festival" and "fantasy" and that the lack of either or both is a serious detriment to his essential humanity.

It is important to emphasize that among other things man in his very essence is *homo festivus* and *homo fantasia*. Celebrating and imagining are integral parts of his humanity. But Western industrial man in the past few centuries has begun to lose his capacity for festivity and fantasy, and this loss is calamitous for three reasons: (1) it deforms man by depriving him of an essential ingredient in human existence, (2) it endangers his very survival as a species by rendering him provincial and less adaptive, and (3) it robs him of a crucial means of sensing his important place in fulfilling the destiny of the cosmos. The loss is personal, social, and religious.³

In order to have either "fantasy" or "festivity" man must have and make use of symbols. If the Church would participate with man in the celebration of life she must be prepared to offer him living and viable symbols for and of his faith. Fundamentally, this requires a "rebirth of images," and understanding of, and a serious pursuit of the symbol and the symbolic form. Moreover, since christology is at the heart of the Christian faith, there must be a serious confrontation and examination of those symbols which purport to reveal christological truth. A "clouded window" is not possible, the Beyond must be able to shine through.

²Harvey Cox, The Feast of Fools (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 7-18.

³Ibid.

CHAPTER II

THE ROMAN CATACOMBS

Limitations of this Study

This section establishes the perimeters within which the following three chapters are written. The study of catacomb art represents by no means a narrow field of endeavor. Thus it has been necessary to define the boundaries for this study rather sharply. Three main limitations have been established.

First, this study concentrates almost completely on the catacombs of Rome. Catacombs existed throughout both the East and the West. For instance, there are major catacombs at Naples, Milan, Syracuse and Alexandria. However, except in those instances where reference to other locations is required to substantiate a specific point, these other catacombs will not be discussed. Such a limitation has validity. The wealth of material in the Roman catacombs is more than sufficient. These Roman catacombs contain the finest and most representative examples of this type of art; as well as some of the best preserved. This latter fact is due to both the area in which they were constructed and to the specific care which the popes of the Roman Catholic Church lavished upon in the later stages of their development. It is therefore valid and possible to make generalizations and draw conclusions

regarding catacomb art in general on the basis of specific examples from the Roman catacombs.

Second, catacomb art may be broadly divided into three main categories. These three are: frescos (painting), inscriptions and sculpture (sarcophagi). It is the first category with which this study is primarily concerned. The choice is not meant to devalue the need for study in the other two areas. These also can contribute significantly to Christian faith and the knowledge about the early church. The choice was made here essentially on the basis of expediency. Each category comprises a subject area in itself. Therefore, it was not feasible to adequately or realistically investigate each one in the course of this paper. The frescos seemed the most promising choice in terms of their wider significance for the contemporary church. They contain many of the similar themes as those in the inscriptions and the sarcophagi. Moreover, some are very ancient, particularly more so than the sculpture.

Third, this study is time-limited as well as space and content limited. The Roman catacombs remained in use as burial chambers until approximately 410 A.D. This date marks the barbarian invasions of Alaric and ultimate destruction for Rome. After Alaric the catacombs were not used as burial chambers. However, they continued in use as shrines and sacred monuments well into the eighth century. They were neglected and forgotten when the popes, from the middle of the eighth century, systematically removed the sacred relics for preservation. New interest in the catacombs began in 1578 with the work of Oruphrius Panvinus, an

Augustinian friar. However, the most significant frescos for this study are those from the second through the third centuries. That is, the ones painted prior to the "Peace of the Church." With the establishment of Constantine and the elevation of Christianity as the "official" Roman religion, the character of the art underwent notable change. Among the marks of that change was the tendency toward rigidity in regard to both form and content.

With these three limitations in mind, it is helpful to turn next to an examination of the origins and purposes of the catacombs themselves.

The Origins and Purposes of the Catacombs

The precise etymology of the term "catacomb" is uncertain. De Rossi suggests that in ancient times the area was called either *hypogoeum* (subterranean place) or *coemeterium* (sleeping place).¹ It is his belief that the latter is distinctively Christian in origin, an outgrowth of the Christian belief in the hope of immortality. The terms *martyrium* or *confessio* were also used. These designations related to the fact that the "martyrs" or "confessors of the faith" were buried there. The word "catacomb" itself does not appear before the end of the third century. Even then it is utilized as a geographical designation rather than as a name. Still later the term became expressly associated with one of the cemeteries along the Via Appia, that

¹Giovanni Battista de Rossi, Roma Sotterranea (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869), p. 29.

of St. Sebastian. It is now used as a name to designate all underground burial places of this type.

The term *coemeterium* referred to a series or a collected grouping of tombs rather than to a single sepulchre. The single grave is called *locus* or *loculus*. De Rossi believes that the particular catacombs might have received their names in one of four ways.²

(1) the title could be derived from the name of the original owners (Catacombs Lucina, Priscilla, Flavia Domitilla and Praetextatus); (2) the title could be derived from the name of the one who presided over its construction (Catacombs St. Callixtus and St. Mark); (3) the titles were derived in honor of the principal martyrs buried there (Catacombs SS. Hermes, Basilla and Protus); (4) the titles were given as a result of some particularity of their position ("ad catacumbus on the Via Appia" or "ad duas Lauros on the Via Labicana").

The purpose of the catacombs was twofold. They were used as burial chambers and as places of worship. Both scholarship and archaeological studies indicate that they were specifically and intentionally constructed for these two purposes.

Both burial and cremation were common during the Roman era. In fact, even when cremation became the preferred manner of disposing of the dead, the urns containing the ashes were often placed within a family sepulchre. The Jews also practiced underground burial in a manner very similar to that of the Christians. Therefore, it would be

²Ibid., pp. 27-28.

erroneous to conclude that all catacombs were Christian in nature, or that the idea of underground burial originated with Christianity. In fact, De Rossi indicates that there was fundamentally little difference between the Christian and non-Christian catacombs. In the former however, the graves themselves were sealed to permit visits to the cemetery, and in the latter the graves were left open and the chamber itself was sealed.³

Furthermore, underground burial was not the only method which the Christians themselves utilized to dispose of their dead. Frequently, they merely conformed to the local customs. Lowrie gives descriptions of several of these different types.⁴ In Rome both subterranean and surface burial was used by the Christians. The latter, by the beginning of the fifth century had become the dominant mode. What is most significant about the Roman catacombs is their great extent. It is estimated that there are more than 500 miles of these underground burial chambers.

It is therefore possible to raise the question as to why the Christians gravitated toward this particular method for taking care of their dead. The argument that the catacombs originated primarily to protect the graves and bodies from desecration by pagans or persecutors is not a plausible one. It is not plausible for two main reasons. The first of these is supported by the excavations of the cemeteries

³Ibid., p. 57.

⁴Walter Lowrie, Monuments of the Early Church (New York: Macmillan, 1923), pp. 40-41.

themselves. This evidence indicates that in the first centuries the cemeteries were designed to be freely accessible. The openings to them were plainly visible. It was only in the third century when express edicts against the cemeteries were issued that new openings were constructed which offered greater concealment. The Edict of Valerian in 257 A.D. was one of those specifically directed against visits to these cemeteries. However, De Rossi thinks that this was aimed rather at their use as places of worship or for sacred assemblies than as places of burial.⁵

The second reason that it is probably inaccurate to link the origin of the catacombs with the need for protection is related to the Roman laws governing the burial of the dead. The legal maxim in this regard was "*Religiosum locum unusquisque sua voluntate facit, dum mortuum infert in locum suum*" ("Each of his own will constitutes a religious spot when he introduces in his property a dead body"). Since it was a *locus religiosus* it was thereby under the protection of the Roman government. This protection included not only the grave itself but the monument, the surrounding grounds and any other property annexed to it. Moreover, this property belonged exclusively and forever to the family buried there. The formula for marking the boundaries indicated how far frontwards and how far backwards the area extended. "*In fronte, pedes . . .*" "*In agro, pedes . . .*" According to De Rossi, an average or moderate area for a Roman grave might have been 125 Roman

⁵Rossi, op. cit., pp. 54, 87.

feet each way.⁶ The inscription on the monument also included the specific purpose of the tomb. It could be *sibi et suis* (for self and family) or it could be extended to include other specified groups and/or individuals. This fact has given rise to the hypothesis that the Christian catacombs remained essentially in private ownership until at least the third century. The owner, without relinquishing his title, could provide for the burial of those who worshipped in his house. Furthermore, according to De Rossi, Roman law also permitted the bodies of those who had forfeited their lives to the law to be given for burial to those who asked.⁷

In addition, Roman law permitted the establishment of burial fraternities. These were societies specifically organized to provide proper burial and care for their members. The members paid monthly dues and were assured that the proper funeral rites would be given them. Special donations could be made to provide funeral feasts on the anniversaries of their death. Regular meetings were held to conduct the business affairs of the society. Such groups were called *collegia* and they were widespread throughout the Roman Empire. Prior to the second century the *collegia* were not religious in character. However, by the time of Hadrian some societies were specifically associated with particular deities. On the basis of this evidence De Rossi has proposed an interesting hypothesis as to how the Church managed to retain her cemeteries in times of persecution.⁸ He suggests that the Church

⁶Ibid., p. 47.

⁷Ibid., pp. 46-47.

⁸Ibid., pp. 49-50.

obtained the legal protection for the cemeteries by having itself recognized as a burial society. The claim is not that this was a single society but that each Christian community would have constituted a particular society. The ties between these would have been concealed from the government. De Rossi's thesis, although it does offer a solution, has not been well accepted. Lowrie is one of those who regards it as somewhat less than tenable.

Plausible as this theory is, we cannot easily imagine that the bishops of Rome, Carthage, or Alexandria would go to the prefecture with tongue in cheek to register as the president of a burial society, or that the State would be deceived by such a statement when it was notorious that the Christian society amounted to many thousands.⁹

The catacombs themselves offer no definitive solution to the dilemma. Indeed, they add to it. The estimated number of miles and the number of persons buried there (over 800 in an area 100 feet *in fronte* and 180 feet *in agro* as in the crypt of St. Lucina in the Catacomb of St. Callixtus) does not offer support for a theory of secrecy. In the third century there may have been well over 40,000 Christians in Rome alone.

The large number of Roman Christians has a direct bearing on the second purpose for which the catacombs were constructed, that of worship. Popular theory has held that these chambers were used regularly by the Christians as places of public worship, especially during periods of persecution. However, the structural evidence presented by

⁹Walter Lowrie, Art in the Early Church (New York: Pantheon, 1947), p. 41.

the catacombs does not support such a view. Although there are chambers which seem to have been constructed as "chapels" of some kind, these are not adequate enough to accomodate as many as fifty persons. It is true that such chambers were often connected by corridors to neighboring ones, but even at that the number of persons using them could not have been much more than one hundred. In view of the large Christian population of Rome it does not seem likely that such conditions were adequate to allow for the regular practice of worship within the catacombs.

However, a particular type of worship does seem to have been practiced which is supported by the archeological evidence. It was the custom among the Romans and others to conduct funeral feasts at the burial of and on the anniversary of the death of those in the tombs. The Christians seemed to have continued this practice in the form of the eucharistic celebration. Lowrie's description of such a chapel is illustrative of the archeological support for the theory.

One of the most ample and complete of these subterranean basilicas is a crypt in the Ostrian cemetery which is provided with a presbytery architecturally separated from the nave, ending with an apse, an elevated seat for the bishop, and a lower bench for the presbyters. Here there are also lateral niches for the sacred utensils, and on the other side of the corridor there is a corresponding chamber for the women.¹⁰

In addition, the crypts were often decorated with frescos depicting eucharistic scenes.

¹⁰Lowrie, Monuments, pp. 26-27.

Lowrie believes that the *agape* was the Christian form of the funeral feast.¹¹ He describes the practice in these terms.

The agape was the earliest form in which Christian charity was manifested toward the poor of the Church; it was a feast in which all, rich and poor, shared alike from the common stock.¹²

According to Lowrie the practice had become specifically a funeral feast by the end of the second century and thus could be legally continued under the Roman law.

Although the mode of burial in the form of underground cemeteries was not peculiar to the Christians they did utilize it to a great extent. Why did this particular form attract them so greatly? Lowrie and De Rossi are among those who attribute significant influence in this respect to the tomb stories surrounding Jesus' death.

According to the Gospel accounts the body was placed in a "cave" or a tomb cut from the rock and sealed with a large stone. One notices the similarity with the story of Lazarus in the Fourth Gospel. The shelf-like projections or ledges in both accounts are similar to constructions in the catacombs. Moreover, the raising of Lazarus is a frequent motif in the frescos and on the sarcophagi. However, it must be noted that in the paintings and in the Gospel accounts that both Jesus' and Lazarus' tomb is more indicative of an above-ground than an underground burial chamber. Furthermore, the open tomb stories are relatively later additions; and the accounts in John may be as late as 110 A.D. De Rossi has dated a number of very ancient catacombs from

¹¹Ibid., pp. 50-53.

¹²Ibid., p. 51.

at least the end of the apostolic age and has set the date of at least one of these at 111 A.D. I do not deny the fact that the traditions surrounding Jesus' burial may have given support to the use of the catacombs by the Christians. However, I do not think that there is a valid connection between these stories and the origins of the catacombs themselves.

Lowrie makes particular mention of the fact that the Christians chose burial rather than cremation. In his earlier work he drew a connection between this practice and the Christian hope in the resurrection of the body.

There is no doubt that the practice of inhumation was prescribed by the new faith and obligatory upon all the faithful; with a naive conception of the doctrine of the Resurrection cremation seemed irreconcilable.¹³

However, in a later book, he diminishes the importance of this relationship to some degree.

We cannot wonder that the Christians adopted it (inhumation), since it was the Jewish custom and had a certain relevance to the hope of the resurrection. It was not an essential expression of this hope, for no one imagined that the martyrs who were devoured by fire or by wild beasts were at any disadvantage.¹⁴

His second point of view is, to me, the more correct one. Paul's understanding of the resurrection of the body is, by no means, a "naive" one as any serious study of 1 Corinthians 15 quickly reveals. The real thrust of the inter-relationship between the hope for the

¹³Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁴Lowrie, Art., p. 42.

resurrection and the mode of expression in the catacombs is to be found not in their method, but in their art.

A General Description of the Catacombs

It was noted in the preceding section that the total number of miles comprising the Roman catacombs has been estimated at over five hundred. The figure tends to be somewhat deceptive. If the catacombs of Rome were "stretched out" they would run the total length of Italy. However, that is precisely the point. The catacombs do not form a straight line from one end to the other over the five hundred mile distance. Rather, they comprise a complex and intricate network of tunnels which cross and recross one another at various levels.

Moreover, archeological evidence indicates that the design and construction was not haphazard. Excavations of the various catacombs reveal a careful and precise plan at work. The design of the catacombs was carried out by a group of men called *fossores*. They formed a kind of "burial guild" with the double function of preparing the body for burial and performing the burial itself. This group also held a particular position within the Church hierarchy. A third century listing places them among the clergy, although as one of the lowest grades. By the end of the fourth century they seemed to have had general control of the cemeteries. Their position is in striking contrast to that of the "gravediggers" in the pagan world which may be a further indication of the Christian attitude toward death.

The *fossores* were restricted in their excavations by several factors, some social and some natural. Roman law forbade burial within the city walls. The inner limit was marked by the Servian wall located approximately one mile from the city. There was no specific outer limit. However, the major cemeteries, both Christian and non-Christian, are located within one to three miles of the city. Cemeteries beyond this point are usually assigned to the Campagna rather than Rome. Generally, high ground was required for the excavations. This was particularly necessary because of the danger due to flooding. Lower levels in many of the existing catacombs today reveal the real need for this precaution. In addition, a special type and quality of soil was required. Roman topography reveals three main types. The first of these is the lithoid tufa which is most often used in construction but does not seem to have been feasible for the narrow passages needed in the excavation of the corridors. The second of these is the sand which is utilized in cement and mortar. It is not hard enough for the construction of the walls and passages but was utilized for the masonry work. The last, the granular tufa is the only one which was suitable. De Rossi's brother Michele was said to be able to determine the location of an ancient catacomb simply by checking these qualifications as to where it ought to be.¹⁵

The various catacombs were not joined to one another even though they might be separated by only a small barrier. Catacombs

¹⁵Lowrie, Monuments, p. 35.

Praetextatus and Callixtus as an example are only separated by the Via Appia. However, there is no means of traverse from one to the other beneath the surface. Each catacomb therefore represents a distinctive area within which is a vast and interwoven system of corridors and levels.

Such levels are called *piani*. The first level was located from eight to twenty-five yards below the surface, but there are often three, four or even five levels set above each other to a depth of fifty feet. Descent from each level was made possible by a series of steps rather than by means of a gradual slope. A wide band of tufa served as a divider between each successive level. As De Rossi indicates this was a deliberate tactic developed by the *fossores* to prevent collapse in the galleries and chambers.¹⁶

Each level was composed of a series of these corridors and chambers. The corridors were from two to four feet in width and varied in height, although usually they were no more than the height of a man. The walls of the corridors were lined with "shelf-like" cavities. It was in these that the body was placed. These tombs are oblong in shape and correspond in length to the size of the body inside. Odd-sized areas within the walls were used for the tombs of children so that almost all available space was utilized.

Through small doorways the corridors led into the larger burial chambers. The archeologists' designation for these is *cubiculum*. The

¹⁶Rossi, op. cit., p. 335.

shelf-like niches were also located within the walls of these *cubicula*. Within the *cubicula* it is possible to distinguish a more elaborate type of tomb. Such tombs are characterized by long oblong spaces which were either hollowed out of the rock or built up with stones. A slab of marble was placed horizontally across the top to form the closing. The niches cut above these tombs are of the same length as the grave itself. There are two types of this formation. The most frequent is a semi-circular form called an *acrosolia*. However, rectangular niches have also been found. There seems to have been no particular name for these in ancient times. De Rossi uses the designation *sepulcro a mensa* (table-tomb) in referring to them.

The *cubicula* often served as the places of worship in the celebration of the eucharist. The marble slab over the grave would supply the altar. Light and ventilation for such "chapels" were supplied by means of a shaft called a *luminare*. Several *cubicula* in close proximity to one another would utilize the same *luminare*. In addition, this closeness allowed several groups of Christians to participate in the eucharistic celebration together.

The body or bodies were placed either singly or side by side in the graves wrapped only in a winding sheet. Often there was no embalment. The grave was then closed with a slab of stone or with a series of tiles embedded in the wet plaster. This surface often provided the area for decoration although the ceilings of the chambers was the principal space utilized for this purpose. The burial chambers could

also contain sarcophagi of clay, lead, or stone with or without decoration.

It is impossible to determine the exact number of Christians buried in these underground tombs. If a small area can contain as many as 800 bodies, and the total area is over 22,000,000 square feet, then to estimate that there are more than a million bodies there is not an exaggeration. Lowrie's remark is understandable.

The fact is that the literary sources of history had not prepared us to accept such testimony as the catacombs bore to the numerical and also to the material and organized strength of the Church during the age of persecution.¹⁷

Catacomb Art

The structures of the catacombs and their purposes both exercised an important influence on the art which developed. Lowrie describes this art as "sepulchral." It is an art which is appropriate to the tomb when directed by the Christian hope in the face of death. In fact, it would not be far wrong to assert that fundamentally it was that hope which made the art possible at all.

The underground chambers and corridors of these catacombs do not seem to be the most promising of places to develop an art form, particularly a triumphant one. The work space is not large and the light and ventilation are poor. Moreover, except for the larger chambers which were used for the eucharistic services or the martyrs'

¹⁷Lowrie, Monuments, p. 32.

shrines, much of the art was in a very literal sense for private use only.

Thus, the argument that such art was not primarily didactic is a valid one. This is not to deny that there was some element of teaching present, but the results were probably indirect rather than direct in their intention. There are two main factors which offer support for this view. First, those who came to the catacombs were already believers. They were there to bury their dead, celebrate the eucharist or pay homage to a Christian martyr. These practices presuppose that they were already instructed in the faith. The art reinforced or bore witness to this faith, but was not there essentially to provide instruction. Second, the bulk of the art is symbolic in nature. This is true even in those instances where "history" or "narration" forms the primary subject matter. Stories can be abbreviated to one scene and symbols appear throughout. The viewer is required to depend upon his imagination and knowledge to supply the details and the content for the meaning. The presupposition is that this is familiar; that the one viewing it will know immediately what is intended.

It is possible as both Lowrie and De Rossi show to trace the development of this art through a series of evolving stages and patterns. This provides a basis for dating the particular paintings with some accuracy. According to Lowrie there is "no Christian art per

se" prior to the early part of the second century.¹⁸ In the earlier periods there was "merely a selection of the more innocent themes of pagan art, to some of which a Christian symbolical sense might be attached."¹⁹ The art of the first period is primarily decorative art, although a process of selection was utilized either consciously or unconsciously by the artists. De Rossi describes this period in a similar manner; but notes that there was often a principal figure either symbolic or biblical around which the decoration was developed and which gave a religious character to the whole.²⁰

Lowrie's second major period in this evolutionary process begins in the middle of the second century with the development of a "truly Christian" art. The content during this period was essentially Biblical and reflected a certain fixity in its form. This trend continued throughout the third century. It was represented by an increasing interest in Biblical traditions presented through symbolism and with mystical interpretations. This time period coincides with the increasing persecution faced by the Church at Rome. It would probably not be incorrect to assume some kind of real correlation between the increase in persecution and the increase of symbolic presentations. In the more "public" areas of the catacombs the symbols could aptly supply the need for secrecy. Only the initiated would understand the intent of the design.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 189.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Rossi, op. cit., p. 196.

The fourth century begins the third period in this process of development. It is characterized by definite and notable changes in the art. Some symbolism is still present, at least in the early part of the century. However, it is "more obvious" symbolism; one which is more dogmatic and more stereotyped in its expressions. Lowrie's characterization of the art offers a clue to the reason for some of the changes. He describes it as "more ecclesiastical."²¹ This description is even more understandable when one remembers that this period coincides closely with the "Peace of the Church" and the rise of Christianity under Constantine. Moreover, it was during this period that the art emerged from the catacombs in a literal sense. It became public art and was utilized especially for the decorations of the Church. The theologians and the Church authorities began to exercise more control over the art at this point. The art of the catacombs which developed in response to popular needs and concerns now became a tool for the teaching of Church dogma and doctrine. By the end of the fourth century the use of symbolism has been superseded by the use of Biblical stories. Scenes from the Church's contemporary life were also included as well as some from the time of persecution. It is at this point also that the scenes of Christ's Passion make their appearance. Thus, the close of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth represent a new period in the history of Christian art. However, as this also corresponds to the relative abandonment of the catacombs it

²¹Lowrie, Monuments, p. 190.

is beyond the scope of this particular study. The concentration here is on the second period especially when symbolic interpretation was most dominant.

Katharine McClinton in her book *Christian Church Art Through the Ages* draws a fundamental distinction between "sepulchral art" which she assigns to the third century and "triumphant art" which she sees as originating after Constantine.²² Although the division may have some historical accuracy, it misses a fundamentally important point. Despite the fact that this early art was "death-related" and had its origin in the grave, it is nonetheless triumphant. Indeed, that is what gives this art its essential grandeur and makes it so important as a study. This art is indicative of the basic Christian stance when confronted with the problem of real destruction. It is a joyous art and its joy is authentic in the face of an equally real joylessness. By all rights such art should be somber, terrible or, at least solemn. It is not. It is life-affirming in the midst of death, celebrating in the midst of despair and future oriented in the midst of past tragedies and present terrors. Its hope is in God and to that hope its symbols bear eloquent testimony.

²²Katharine Morrison McClinton, Christian Church Art Through the Ages (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 26-39.

CHAPTER III

THE PRIMARY MOTIFS OF THE FRESCOS

The Basic Categories

A casual survey of the catacomb frescos gives the distinct impression that they have been painted with little or no attention to organization and according to no particular plan. In one sense, this first impression is valid. Since there was relatively little work space available the artists utilized whatever areas could be found. Thus, a series of paintings on a given wall usually have little external relationship to each other except in their common purposes of decoration and/or witness. Unless there is some specific cause for linking a group of frescos together in a particular pattern, each one should be thought of as a separate work.

However, it is possible to identify certain general themes and types which manifest themselves repeatedly in these paintings. This has led De Rossi to categorize the art in terms of six basic "classes."

The Christian paintings of that period have been divided into six classes; and although these classes are of very unequal extent and importance, and it will be found practically impossible to keep them quite distinct in treatment, yet the division is worth remembering, and may serve to impress upon our minds the main characteristics of the subject. The first and largest class of paintings, then, may be called symbolical, as merely expressing, under pictorial emblems, religious thoughts or ideas. The second we will call allegorical; they represent, more or less accurately, some of the parables of the Gospel.

The third is of biblical histories, either from the Old or New Testaments. Fourthly, we will speak of sacred pictures of Our Divine Lord, of His Holy Mother and the saints; then of scenes from the lives of the saints, or the history of the Church; and lastly, of scenes from the Liturgy.¹

Lowrie's approach, on the other hand, reveals a more general orientation. He discusses the art in terms of an over-arching theme within a cycle of "divine deliverance and miracle." He then treats the important symbols separately within this framework. However, Lowrie is careful to note that not all the art should be regarded as deliverance in specifically funeral terms. That is, as only deliverance from bodily death.

The study presented in this paper follows neither De Rossi's nor Lowrie's approach. Rather, I would suggest that there are four basic categories which can be identified in the art as having primary importance. The first of these coincides closely with Lowrie's theme of deliverance. This deliverance is from bodily death but it is also understood in terms of deliverance from present difficulties. Its purpose is to provide assurance and hope for the Christian by a witness to the power of God. Thus the art in this category is a portrayal of what can be termed "sacred history." There is a depiction of events from history, particularly as it is understood from the perspective of the Old Testament. The intent, however, is not simply to provide historical data. Rather, its intention is to re-present what God has

¹Giovanni battista de Rossi, Roma Sotterania (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869), pp. 200-201.

accomplished in history as a testimony to what He can now or will yet do. There are many paintings which can be subsumed under this heading. However, I have chosen to discuss only three, namely the depictions of Noah, Daniel and Jonah. These are among the most representative and the most frequent.

The general theme of the second category is that of Immortality. It includes those frescos which are specifically associated with the hope for a life after death and to a belief in the immortality of the soul. As in the case of the first category the intent is to assure the Christian of the reality of this hope while at the same time giving witness to it in faith. Although all of the catacomb symbols are, at one level, future oriented in this sense, some symbols are more explicitly related to this hope than others. The *orant* and the "heavenly banquet" have been chosen as the basic representative symbols within this grouping.

The third category is concerned with the sacraments as they are presented in the art. This section corresponds most closely with what De Rossi termed as "liturgical paintings." However, I exclude the ecclesiastical references and "holy paintings" which he discusses and center rather on the two rituals of baptism and the eucharist. De Rossi notes that these liturgical frescos are relatively rare. He links this scarcity to the perceived need in the early community for secrecy in regard to the protection of the "sacred mysteries" from the view or knowledge of the uninitiated. His understanding coincides

in a strikingly similar manner with the discussion of J. Jeremias concerning the place of the eucharist in the Fourth Gospel.²

The fourth category is that one directly concerned with the issue of christology. In this group are the symbols which have an explicit christological emphasis or are intended to witness to a specific aspect of the understanding of Christ within the early community. Since this study has its central focus in the formation of an approach to christology I have chosen to discuss this category within a separate chapter. The methodology and scope for that study is given in the first section of Chapter IV.

Each of the three sections which follow concentrates on one of the first three categories noted above. Each of the sections contains first a description of the frescos themselves and secondly a brief analysis of the primary symbols contained in them. Thirdly, there is a brief discussion of the purpose of the frescos in terms of the early Christian community.

One point must be made clear from the beginning. These four categories which I have established represent a general framework through which one might study the frescos. These should not be understood as mutually exclusive or exhaustive categories. A number of subjects and symbols have been omitted from these groupings which cannot be subsumed under any of the four headings. Moreover, it is possible, and even probable, that a single painting may be placed within one or more, or

²Joachim Jeremias, The Eucharistic Words of Jesus (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), pp. 125-37.

even all, of the categories at the same time with some degree of correctness. The reason for this is relatively simple. The art forms of the catacombs are symbolic ones. Symbols rely primarily on suggestion and imagination because they are essentially concerned with what cannot be realistically, that is literally, depicted. The vitality and impact of a symbol is in this flexibility. It has the power to convey, in one form, a multiplicity of truths. It is also what makes interpretation so difficult. There is always that desire to establish specific boundaries and exclude as much divergence as possible. It is when this is done that the function of the symbol as a symbol is substantially hindered. Thus, the primary motifs exhibited by these early frescos must be approached with a great degree of openness.

Deliverance: Noah, Daniel and Jonah

Frescos depicting the story of Noah appear as early as the end of the first century, and are particularly frequent in the second and third centuries. Usually Noah is shown alone standing in a small cubical box with his arms outstretched. The box appears to be floating on water. A dove flies toward him with an olive branch. Highly abbreviated forms of this painting show only the dove and the branch or even the branch alone. Lowrie mentions only one instance where Noah's whole family is represented in the box along with a variety of birds and beasts. However, this scene is not in a fresco but on a sarcophagus and it is not at Rome but at Treves. The figure of Noah is clothed in each instance. His dress is usually of the type known as a *dalmatic*.

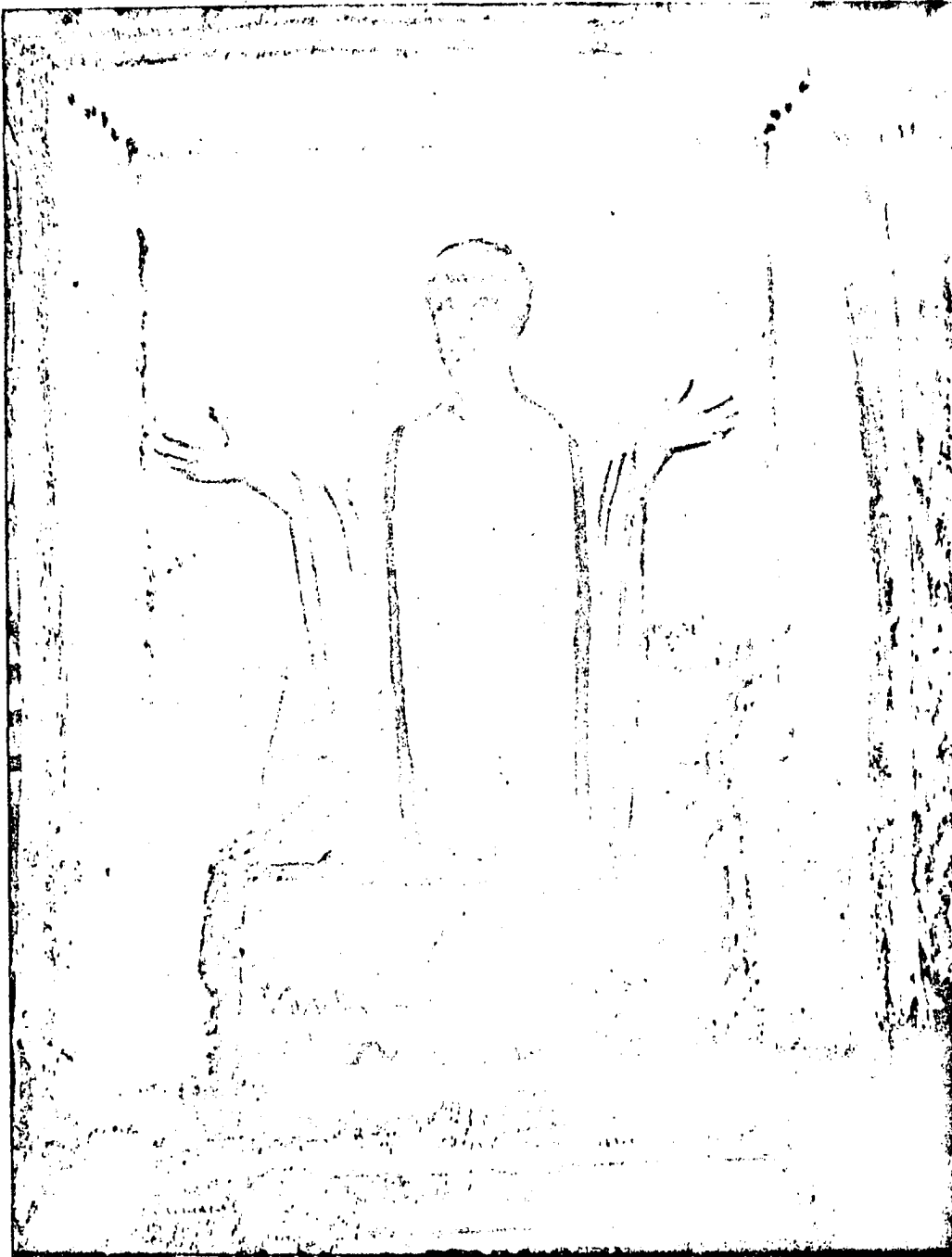


Figure 2. Noah - Via Latina
(from Ferrua)

This garment consisted of a loose full gown with wide sleeves. The *dalmatic* could be worn by either men or women although the women's were usually longer and extended to the ankles. Noah's *dalmatic* is decorated with the *clavus*; a stripe which crosses each shoulder and extends the length of the garment both front and back. Some ranking could be attached to the width of the stripes, but this does not seem to have been the artist's intention. Generally speaking, Noah's dress is typical of the Roman period and not that of the early Jewish eras.

The Old Testament account of the Flood in Genesis 6:5-9:28 provided the background for the painting. Thus, there is a fundamental "Jewishness" to its interpretation. The "box" in the painting is a particularly interesting symbol. Popular imagery today tends to associate Noah with a large ship-like structure called an "Ark." However, the simple box-shape provided a sufficient image for these early artists. There are precedents for this choice of symbol in both Jewish and classical art. The ark is represented in a similar manner in Jewish catacombs. It is also found in this manner on an ancient coin. The coin was minted in the time of Septimus Severus for the town of Apamea in Phrygia. On the coin Noah and his wife are both represented twice. Once in the ark with the dove and raven and once upon the land in an attitude of prayer. In classical art the box-like shape was often used to denote the chest in which Danae and Perseus were set adrift.

In addition, there were specifically Christian understandings regarding the significance of the ark within the Church. In

I Peter 3:20-21 the ark is utilized as a symbol for Christian baptism. As Noah was saved through water, the Christian is saved through baptism. Tertullian's statement indicates a similar understanding of the relationship.

As after the waters of the deluge, in which the old iniquity was purged away, as after that *baptism* (so to call it) of the old world, a dove was sent out of the ark and returning with an olive-branch, was the herald to announce to the earth peace and the cessation of the wrath of heaven, so by a similar disposition with reference to matters spiritual, the dove of the Holy Spirit, sent forth from heaven, flies to the earth, i.e., to our flesh, as it comes out of the bath of regeneration after its old sins, and brings us to the peace of God; where the Church is clearly prefigured by the Ark.³

De Rossi's own suggestion as to the intention of the painting reflects a similar motif.

. . . that the faithful, having obtained remission of their sins through baptism, have received from the Holy Spirit the gift of Divine peace, and are saved in the mystical ark of the Church from the destruction which awaits the world.⁴

The paintings of Noah are a good example of what Lowrie means when he asserts that there is a real correspondence between the artistic and literary symbolism of the Church in this period. "The art of the Roman catacombs was the art of the Church."⁵ However, it must be emphasized that such correspondence was not always the case. Early

³Rossi, op. cit., p. 242.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Walter Lowrie, Monuments of the Early Church (New York: Macmillan, 1923), p. 191.

Christian art drew from a wide variety of sources. Although the greater part of the art was selected because it did coincide with Church teachings and assertions, the earlier non-Christian imagery of the pagan world had a decisive influence. Those first Christian converts did not simply leave behind the wealth of ideas and symbols which they had known prior to their conversion. The literary sources of the New Testament reveal a strong dependence on Greek, Roman, and Oriental traditions as well as the Jewish. A similar dynamic was at work in the art. Thus, in a fresco of the early fourth century in the Catacomb of Petrus and Marcellinus, one finds the interesting image of Christ in the chariot as the sun-god Apollo.

However, the story of Noah was specifically utilized in the teachings of the Church. Noah was regarded as a symbol of God's grace and salvation. Noah was saved from total destruction through God's saving grace and power. The faithful Christian will also be saved through God's grace. Thus, the image of Noah serves to remind the Christian that for those that are in Christ (through baptism) there will be no final destruction but rather ultimate deliverance.

Frescos with the figure of Daniel appear as early as the end of the first century. There are two important variations within the Daniel theme. One variation shows Daniel standing between two lions. His arms are extended in prayer and his eyes are raised to heaven. A lion approaches from either side. Often the prophet Habakkuk is shown at his side to offer him bread. In these paintings Daniel may be either clothed in a short tunic or he may be naked, the latter is quite

frequent. The instances of nakedness are especially noteworthy. Although nude or half-nude figures were prevalent in the classical art of that period, they are relatively rare in the catacombs. Eve is the only female figure who is not clothed. Adam and Jonah are the other two male figures that are shown in this manner. These are not the only instances, but they are the most common. Lowrie mentions several others among which are two of Christ; one showing his baptism and the other depicting the crucifixion.⁶ The latter is a later work.

The association of Habakkuk with Daniel is based on apocryphal rather than canonical literature. The incident is presented in the book Bel and the Dragon 1:33-39. The theme is a frequent one in the art and indicates that these stories were probably well known and considered of some significance. Thus it offers interesting suggestions as to the character of the "popular theology" of the time.

There is further support in this respect offered by the second of the variations. In these paintings Daniel is depicted as the "dragon-slayer." This story is the second part of the apocryphal book and is the account of Daniel's destruction of the dragon-god of Babylon. The dragon is a particularly important symbol of evil in both the art and also in the literary sources of both the Old and New Testaments. In these paintings the dragon has the form of a serpent similar to the one which is depicted in the scenes showing the temptation of Eve. Scenes depicting the story of Jonah utilize another form of the dragon

⁶Ibid., p. 208.



Figure 3. Daniel and the Lions, The Good Shepherd
and the Three Children
(from Wilpert)

symbol; there it is in the form of a sea-serpent. The dragon-sea-serpent image is associated with the image of "chaos" in the Old Testament and in the New Testament with Satan, particularly in the Apocalypse. Its use in relation to Daniel may be understood as a further witness to God's triumph over the powers of evil.

Daniel with God's aid defeated the false gods and powers of Babylon. The Christian with God's aid will yet defeat the false gods and powers of his age. A secondary level of imagery may also be identified here, although it is less obvious. The parallelism of Rome-Babylon as a symbol for ultimate disobedience and wickedness is used throughout the Apocalypse. Perhaps the Christian artists saw some special parallel between Daniel's defeat of the false idols of Babylon as a prefiguration of the inevitable defeat of the false idols of Rome. In this sense the dragon represents Rome and Daniel may be interpreted as a prefiguration or type of Christ. There is some further support for this theory in the fact that the dragon motif was especially popular in Roman art itself.

The symbol of Daniel between the lions is essentially one of hope. Daniel's faith in God delivered him from the jaws of death. The Christian who remains faithful will also be delivered from the final death. Lowrie suggests an additional reason for the popularity of the Daniel imagery.

The great popularity of this subject (Daniel) was probably due to the fact that it represented the fate of so many Christian martyrs. The manner in which the

martyrs were exposed to the beasts in the Roman amphitheatre sometimes influenced the mode in which the subject of Daniel was depicted.⁷

De Rossi interprets the intention of the paintings in terms of encouragement in the face of sufferings and danger by reference to God's protection toward Daniel.⁸ In either case, the symbol may be specifically interpreted in terms of the assurance of deliverance and the promise of hope for those who remained faithful.

The story of Jonah is one of the most popular subjects in catacomb art. The frescos contain many examples of it and the subject is also frequent on the sarcophagi. The story is composed of three main scenes. In the first scene Jonah is depicted being thrown into the sea and into the mouth of a sea-monster. In the second scene he is thrown from the monster's mouth onto the dry land. The third scene shows him lying in safety under a vine of some kind. The three scenes may be abbreviated to a single instance. Interestingly, this is usually the third scene. In this sense, the conclusion represents the complete episode. Or, all three scenes may be crowded together into a small area. In this case, Jonah is frequently thrown directly from the monster's mouth to his place under the ground. This circumstance is a good example of the economy of space which the artists practiced.

As noted above, Jonah is unclothed in these scenes. The image in the third scene especially is reminiscent of one depicting a classical youth at rest. Lowrie believes that the artists' model may have

⁷Ibid., p. 209.

⁸Rossi, op. cit., p. 245.



Figure 4. Jonah
(from Rossi)

been Endymion, the classical symbol of enchanted sleep and eternal youth.⁹

In Lowrie's understanding the third scene is the one usually retained because of its association with the eternal state of the soul. It may be interpreted as a "symbol of the soul in the joy of paradise after being delivered from the dangers and pains of death."¹⁰

The monster in all the paintings is a form of the dragon, and in no way coincides with modern whale imagery. Roman art used a similar symbol in depictions of the story of Andromeda. The symbol is also common in the Jewish art of the synagogue and catacombs. The dragon as he appears in the Jonah paintings is in the form of a sea-beast. He has a long and narrow neck, a large head with ears and sometimes he is shown with horns. De Rossi notes, in passing, a possible reason for this choice in form. His speculation is most interesting and deserves serious consideration. "Perhaps it was represented in this way as a type of death, by way of distinguishing it from the real **IXΘΥΣ**, or Savior."¹¹

The story is, of course, taken directly from the Old Testament traditions. On one level it may be interpreted in terms of deliverance. It then becomes a means of assurance for the Christians. What God has

⁹Walter Lowrie, Art in the Early Church (New York: Pantheon, 1947), p. 41.

¹⁰Lowrie, Monuments, p. 207.

¹¹Rossi, op. cit., p. 244.

done for Jonah He will also do for the Church. However, Jonah required deliverance because he had disobeyed God. According to the text, the "great fish" which swallowed Jonah did so at God's command. Jonah is delivered only after he repents and intends to obey the divine directive. I do not think this would have escaped the minds of the early Christians to whom the story was so familiar. In this sense, it may be interpreted as a reminder of the need for steadfastness and a call to faithfulness, particularly in a time of persecution. The assurance and hope follows upon the obedience. However, although the Old Testament references were certainly influential, there was still another reason why the Christians found Jonah so attractive a symbol. The New Testament utilizes the figure of Jonah as a specific symbol of the resurrection. According to Matthew 12:39f, Jesus himself made this association. Although these words are probably not authentic in the sense that Jesus actually spoke them, they do indicate that the early Christian community discerned a distinct relationship between the "sign of Jonah" and the resurrection of Christ. This imagery alone would be sufficient to explain its frequent inclusion among the frescos.

In summary, it may be said that Noah, Daniel and Jonah were utilized by the early Christians as symbols of divine deliverance and perhaps also as symbols of the need for faithfulness. These Old Testament figures were seen as analogues to the present circumstances in which the Christians found themselves. The Christians did not paint these scenes merely because they were a part of their past history or were fundamental to their tradition. They were included because they

spoke also to the present needs and concerns. They gave witness to the truth revealed in Christ, namely that the saving power of God was active now as it had been then and that their present hope was validated through Christ in these past witnesses. It is the same fundamental assertion which Paul makes in II Corinthians 4:6. The God who was active in creation is the God who is revealed in Christ; similarly, the God who was active in the lives of these Old Testament figures is the same God who is active in the life of the Church. It is for this reason that these deliverance frescos are so important.

Immortality: The Orant and the Banquet

The two symbols which seem to have the most direct association with the condition of the soul after death are the *orant* and the "celestial" or "messianic" banquet.

The *orans* or *orant* refers to a figure who is depicted in a position indicative of prayer. The figure stands with arms outstretched and with eyes raised. This was a typical prayer position for both the Jewish and Gentile communities of the time. It may also have had special significance for the early Christian community due to its striking similarity with the position of Jesus on the cross. The figures of Noah and Daniel as described above are usually shown in the *orant* position. Their stance as such may be viewed as either a prayer for deliverance or as one of thanksgiving. When Daniel is depicted in the struggle with the dragon his hands are otherwise engaged and the *orant* posture is not used.



Figure 5. Female Orant
(from Wilpert)

Portraits of the deceased also display the *orant* position. The term "portrait" should not be understood in a literal sense. The *orant* depicted is generally a female figure dressed in the typical female fashion of the time. This is the case even when the tomb clearly belongs to a man. This does not mean that there are no male *orants*. Obviously the Old Testament figures described above are male. Furthermore, whole families with men, women and children are depicted in this posture and the sex differences are maintained. Apostles and other Church officials are often drawn in a similar manner. However, when the female figure appears alone on a tomb, particularly a man's tomb, or, as is frequently the case, in juxtaposition with the figure of the Good Shepherd, another understanding seems intended.

The most probable interpretation for the *orant* is as a symbol for the soul, usually the soul of the deceased individual. The prayer attitude may be understood in terms of either supplication or thanksgiving. If it is supplication, then the question arises for whom the supplication is intended. Is the deceased praying for himself or for those who remain behind? Wilpert considers it to be the latter and Lowrie believes it is the former.¹² Lowrie's theory is particularly interesting. He interprets the *orant* when it is abstractly presented, as a symbol of faith or as a symbol for the Church. He derives the latter from the fact that "church" (*ecclesia*) is a feminine noun and thus would correspond to the female figure. In his view this accounts

¹²Lowrie, Art, p. 65.

for the frequent connection between the *orant* and the Good Shepherd figures. The faith symbol corresponds to the hope symbolized in the anchor and the love symbolized in the eucharist-agape. This seems a bit doubtful. All the catacomb symbols are essentially faith symbols and the *orant* seems to be too nebulously conceived to have been intended for that purpose specifically. The confusion surrounding its use is too great. Although one symbol may be interpreted in a variety of ways, there is usually some marked uniformity and consistency in its application.

However, it is possible to interpret the *orant* in terms of the immortality of the soul. There is also some literary evidence for such an understanding. One such reference is found in a minor apocryphal work entitled the Acts of S.S. Petrus and Marcellinus. The quotation is from Lowrie.

The executioner testified that he saw their souls issue from their bodies in the form of young virgins, who were adorned with gold and gems and clad in shining garments, and were carried to heaven by the hand of angels.¹³

Lowrie's concept of the correspondence between *ecclesia* and the feminine figure of the *orant* is interesting. However, it should be mentioned that a similar correspondence can be established between the *orant* and the Greek word for soul, $\psi\upsilon\chi\acute{\eta}$.

The basic meaning inherent in the symbol of the *orant* should thus be sought in its fundamental connection with the soul. It may be

¹³Lowrie, Monuments, p. 202.

seen as a concrete representation of the Christian hope in a life beyond the grave. In addition, the soul praying at death is indicative of the basic orientation and stance of the Christian community. It testifies to an attitude that is firmly based in hope rather than in despair.

The second group of paintings which have a direct connection with this hope of immortality are those in which a "banquet" is the central feature. Lowrie discusses this group under the title of the "celestial banquet." However, he himself admits that this is probably a poor term.¹⁴ Marucchi similarly distinguishes this banquet from the eucharist and refers to it as the "heavenly feast."¹⁵ My own preference is for the title "messianic banquet."

These paintings are from the third century at the earliest. The eucharistic paintings are earlier and therefore it is possible that they exercised some influence on the later presentations of the banquet symbolism. They are similar in a number of respects. The number of persons in both is frequently seven. Lowrie thinks that there is a connection between this number and the account of the meal at the Lake in John 21:1-14. "It (the number seven) seems to have been prescribed by the consideration that six disciples ate with the risen Lord on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias."¹⁶ However, the number in the text is

¹⁴Lowrie, Art, p. 71.

¹⁵Orazio Marucchi, Manual of Christian Archeology (Patterson: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1935), p. 295.

¹⁶Lowrie, Art, p. 71.

seven plus Jesus giving a total of eight persons. Moreover, the use of seven can be understood by other means. This number has had a "sacred history" that can be traced throughout the Bible from the seven days of creation in Genesis to the seven plagues and angels of the Apocalypse. As Farbridge illustrates seven has a frequent place in Arab, Babylonian and Greek traditions as well.¹⁷ Finally, the number of persons at this banquet did not have to be seven. One painting shows a family seated around a semi-circular table before which is a tripod with a fist on it. Inscribed above the group are the words, "IRENE DA CALDA; AGAPE MISCE MI" which may be translated as, "Peace, give me warm water, Love give me drink." Presumably the words are addressed to two main servants but these are not pictured; the names are symbolic. Lowrie indicates that the "celestial banquet is distinguished by the fact that servants are on hand to serve the wine."¹⁸ In some cases, the servants are distinctly indicated.

These paintings of the banquet might be problematical as symbols for immortality and the hope for the soul were it not for two factors. First, there is a close correspondence between these depictions and the pagan depictions of the *refrigerium*. This latter symbol represents the pagan funeral banquet and indicates the peace, abundance and refreshment which the soul hoped to find after death. It

¹⁷Maurice H. Farbridge, Studies in Biblical and Semetic Symbolism (New York: KTAV, 1970), pp. 119-139.

¹⁸Lowrie, Art., p. 71.

would not be surprising for the Christians to adopt this symbol as their own, particularly in light of its close association with their own hopes. The common food depicted at the banquet was fish although bread could also be included. Marucchi notes that fish also was an element in the pagan representations of the banquet but he thinks that it indicated nothing more than a "certain degree of sumptuousness."¹⁹

A second reason for its inclusion in this category is more directly derived from the New Testament sources and their Jewish backgrounds. These are the indications and descriptions of the "messianic banquet," that time of feasting related to the establishment of the Kingdom of God and the new age to come. Luke 22:30 is an example of this understanding. It is from this perspective that the banquet can be interpreted as a symbol of the Christian hope. Although the figure of Jesus does not appear in these scenes (excluding the obvious symbolism of the fish), it is clear that they can be taken as witnesses to his promise. The actuality of the "messianic banquet" has its being in the initiator of the messianic age; namely, Jesus Christ.

The Sacraments: Baptism and the Eucharist

Baptism and the eucharist formed the primary rites of the early Christian community. It is therefore not surprising that these found frequent expression in the art. However, they were also considered to be "sacred mysteries" and thus there was a strong reluctance to paint

¹⁹Marucchi, op. cit., p. 295.



Figure 6. Messianic Banquet
(from Wilpert)

either in a realistic manner. Rather, symbols were generally utilized so that only the initiated could understand the significance. This symbolic presentation was particularly the case in regard to the eucharist. This does not mean that there were no realistic portrayals of these two events; the symbolic approach is simply the more frequent.

There was an even more fundamental reason for the inclusion of these two sacraments in the art. In the early Christian community baptism and the eucharist were intimately related to the Christian hope of eternal life. In one sense, both sacraments were the sign and seal of that promise of a new quality of existence both in the present life and after death. In baptism the believer died with Christ so that he might also be raised with him and participate in the resurrection. In the eucharist he participated in fellowship with the risen Christ both in the sense of commemoration of the event of his passion and in an anticipation of the coming of the eschaton. Both baptism and the eucharist are therefore, like the *orant* and the "messianic banquet," symbols of immortality in addition to their representation as liturgical practices within the Church.

The sacrament of baptism was portrayed in several ways. Some of the best examples of these depictions are found in a series of paintings which are located in the "Sacrament Chapels" of St. Callixtus. Six *cubicula* comprise this grouping. The name is given because of the particular prevalence of the sacramental motif in the paintings there. These frescos are relatively ancient, from the late second and early third century.

The first scene which depicts the sacrament of baptism is especially interesting. A figure holding a rod is shown striking a rock from which comes forth water. The figure in this particular instance is an unbearded youth, although similar paintings show him as a bearded man. The picture recalls the account of Moses bringing water from the rock which is given in Exodus 17:1-6. It is thus possible to understand these paintings only as representative of the Exodus story. In this light their intent would be to serve as indications of God's concern and care for His people. This understanding would make the paintings very similar to those which were classified under the category of "deliverance."

However, there is strong evidence for interpreting this fresco as a baptismal symbol as well. In this sense, the figure of Moses would be a prefiguration or symbol for Peter; a not uncommon parallelism for the Church to adduce. Marucchi cites further evidence of the connection between the two figures; the specific scene appears and the name of Peter is included with it.²⁰ However, one need not go outside of the New Testament for support. In I Corinthians 10:1-4, Paul draws a similar parallel between the two. Nor can one ignore the obvious symbolism which develops from Matthew's assertion in 16:16-19 where Peter is expressly called "the Rock" on which the Church is built. From this "Rock" flows the life-giving waters which the early community understood in terms of baptism.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 285-286.

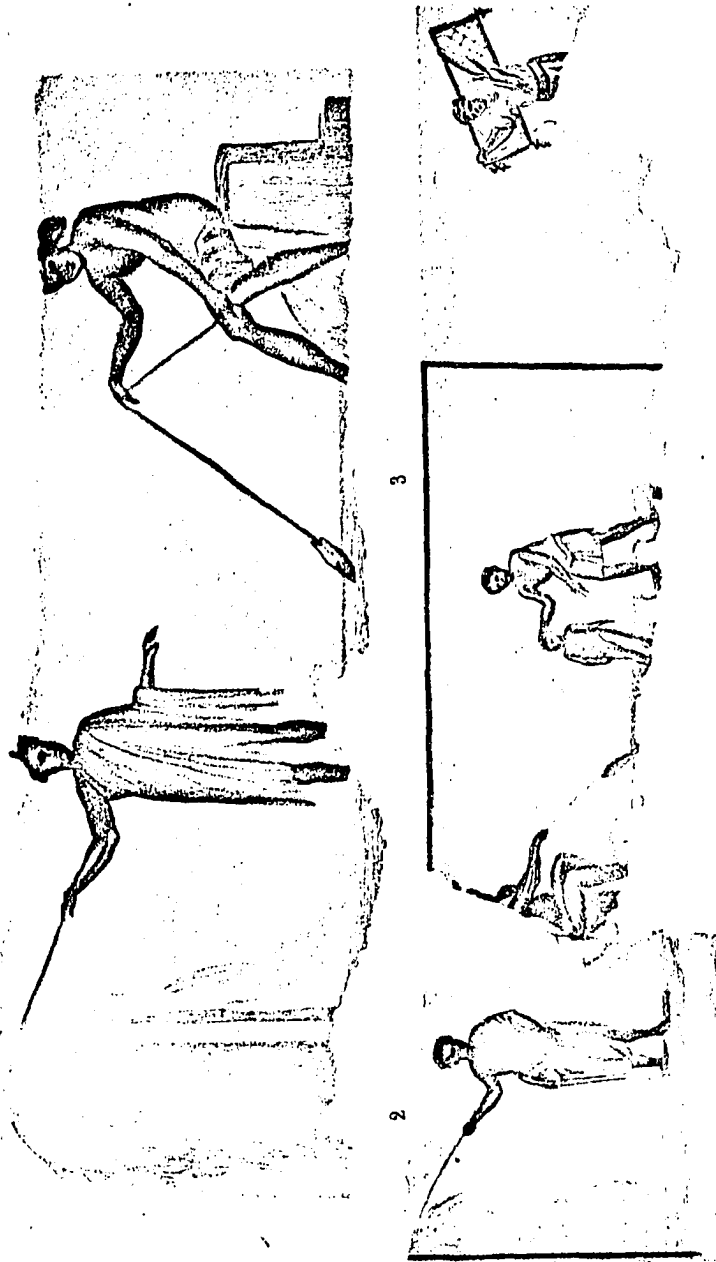


Figure 7. Baptismal Frescos and the
Healing of the Paralytic
(From De Rossi)

This "living water" motif makes it possible to understand the paintings depicting Jesus and the Samaritan woman in a similar manner. Moreover, such a scene is included in the series in the "Sacrament Chapels." It is located directly opposite the baptismal scene described above. The Johannine text offers a clear indication as to how the baptismal reference might have been derived in its understanding of Jesus as the source of the water of eternal life (John 4:13-14). This is not to suggest that the baptismal reference was necessarily the evangelist's intent, but it is possible that these early artists found this understanding in it.

The figure of the fisherman seems to have had baptismal significance also. The figure appears frequently on the sarcophagi, but appears less often in the frescos. The "Sacrament Chapels" contain one of these paintings. It shows a man drawing a fish from the water, the water in the scene is that which Moses/Peter brought from the rock. Lowrie interprets this double use of the water as an attempt to connect the symbol of baptism with that of the eucharist.²¹ His interpretation is possible. However, it should be noted that although the fish is a symbol for the eucharist, this is not the usual form in which it is so used. Rather, the fisherman image recalls the occupation of the primary disciples and especially reminds one of Jesus' words in Mark 1:17, "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men." The figure fishing would thus symbolize either the Church or Jesus himself.

²¹Lowrie, Monuments, p. 227.

The fish drawn from the living water is the Christian who is "drawn" to the Church or to Christ through baptism. This explanation would also account for the artist's double use of the water from the rock. However, it was most probably a result of economy in spacing and therefore should not be over-emphasized.

Two other baptismal references should be noted. They are noteworthy in that they are more nearly realistic portrayals of the act of baptism in contrast to the symbolic presentations described above. The first of these is included among the "sacrament" frescos, the other is not.

This first one shows a figure standing partially immersed as another pours water over him. The baptized figure seems to be that of a young boy. According to De Rossi, this youthfulness has no particular significance. He indicates that "youth is the age of baptism" and moreover that it was "customary to call neophytes, of whatever age they might be, *infantes* or *pueri*."²²

The second type of paintings which seem most realistic are those which depict the baptism of Christ. These are relatively infrequent. De Rossi notes only one ancient painting of this type. It is from the crypt of St. Lucina and is probably from the second century. It shows a man being drawn from the water by a second figure. Presumably this second figure is John the Baptist. The man in the water may be identified as Christ because of the presence of the dove above

²²Rossi, op. cit., p. 268.

his head. Lowrie believes that such pictures were particularly prized by the Church in that they gave support for their practice of baptism.²³ It is possible that these pictures of Jesus were not as difficult for the artists to depict as those of the crucifixion might have been. Baptism was common among the Jewish community and was also practiced by several of the mystery cults. Only the Christian would recognize the special character and significance of Jesus' baptism in contrast to these others.

The eucharist, like baptism, is represented in a variety of forms and symbols. However, it will be possible here to discuss only three. These three were chosen for their representativeness and their particular interest. Two of the paintings in this category are among the earliest which exist. They are from the first part of the second century. One is in the crypt of Lucina and the other is from the cemetery of Priscilla.

This second painting from Catacomb Priscilla depicts the eucharistic celebration in a particularly realistic manner. Its title is usually given as *Fractio Panis* (The Breaking of Bread). The scene contains seven persons seated in a semi-circle around a table. On the table are two plates and a two-handled cup. One of the plates has two fishes on it and the other contains four loaves of bread. The third figure from the right is a woman but the other six are men. At the far left, one of the men is shown literally in the act of breaking a

²³Lowrie, Art, p. 78.

fifth loaf of bread, hence the title. On the wall space at each side of the fresco are paintings of seven baskets of bread. Five of the men face frontwards, as does the woman. The men are dressed in a common Roman tunic, the woman in a *dalmatic*. The sixth man is markedly different. He is shown in profile and is bearded. He wears both the tunic and the *pallium*. The latter was a rectangular piece of cloth, three times as long as it was wide which was worn wrapped about the body in a simple style. The *pallium* without the tunic designated men of learning and philosophy. It is a common style of dress for Christ in the frescos. The combination of tunic and *pallium* was ascribed by the artists to ecclesiastical individuals of some authority. Christ may also be depicted in this style and it is frequent for the apostles.

Whether or not this fresco depicts an actual eucharistic event is uncertain. However, it does reveal some interesting aspects connected with the sacrament. The scene itself recalls a number of New Testament references. The eucharistic meal is frequently designated in the New Testament by the phrase "breaking the bread." The meal of Jesus and his disciples at the Lake of Tiberius which is often included among the eucharistic scenes was composed of these same two elements. In Luke 24:13-32 it is this act of "bread-breaking" which identifies Jesus to the two disciples at Emmaus. Betz interprets the incident as a "cult legend" pertaining specifically to the eucharist.²⁴

H. D. Betz, "The Origin and Nature of Christian Faith According to the Emmaus Legend," Interpretation, XXIII (1969), 32-46.

The number of loaves and fishes also recalls another New Testament incident, namely the feeding of the multitude in John 6:5-14. This is an especially important episode in this respect, because the evangelist himself draws a parallel between this miraculous feeding and Jesus' interpretation of it in John 6:25-28. The chapter is frequently interpreted as a "eucharistic discourse." It is probable that a similar understanding was in the minds of the artists who did the frescos. Furthermore, it was expected that the viewers would easily grasp the significance. Such a presupposition offers important insight as to the place of this tradition within the early Church itself. The painting is from the early second century in Rome. The Fourth Gospel was presumably from the area of Asia Minor and was most likely written in the late first or early second century. What might this indicate concerning John's use of the feeding tradition as a eucharistic analogy?

The second of the early eucharistic paintings to be considered is presented in a much more symbolic form. The fresco is composed of two fish facing one another on the wall of the crypt. The painting between the fish has been destroyed but it is likely that it was of a eucharistic scene of some kind. What remains, however, in the form of the two fish can be specifically interpreted as a reference to this sacrament. The fish are depicted in a manner which seems to suggest that they are swimming in water. This may indicate that these are live fish rather than merely for food. Each fish has on his back a wicker basket containing loaves of bread; there are five in one and six in



Figure 8a. Eucharistic Fish - Callixtus
(from Wilpert)



Figure 8b. Eucharistic Fish - Callixtus
(from Wilpert)

the other. In the basket can be discerned a red patch which has been interpreted by the majority of scholars as representing a glass or vial of wine or wine mixed with water. The latter was commonly used in the eucharistic celebrations. The bread and wine combination is reminiscent of the two elements mentioned in the New Testament accounts of the Last Supper which, interestingly, does not appear in the art of this early period.

The symbol of the fish is especially noteworthy in this painting. The fish as a symbol for Christ himself is discussed in greater detail in Chapter IV. At this point it is sufficient to note that in the eucharistic scenes it represents both the food of the eucharist and the one who gives it. The baskets again recall the connection between the miraculous feeding and the eucharistic celebration. Jerome's familiar saying is often cited in reference to this fresco. "No one is so rich as he who carries the body of Christ in a wicker basket, and his blood in a cup of glass."²⁵ Although Jerome presents a much later witness, he does offer additional support to the eucharistic interpretation of the symbols.

The third fresco to be discussed in this section is included not because it presents a significantly different understanding of the eucharist, but because its interpretation has caused so much difficulty.

The painting depicts two figures standing beside a small, three-legged table. On the table are bread and fish. The figure at the

²⁵Lowrie, Monuments, p. 231.

right is that of a female *orant*. The one on the left is that of a male with his hands outstretched in front of him in a manner designating blessing or consecration. The man is clothed in the *pallium* in a manner similar to that used for philosophers; one side of his body is left exposed. De Rossi associates this dress with that of the early clergy and refers to the fact that "the Greeks and Romans always looked on the philosopher's cloak as a guarantee of more than ordinary knowledge."²⁶ He interprets the man as a priest and the woman as a symbol for the Church. As noted earlier, this is a possible interpretation for the *orant*. The New Testament itself also speaks of the Church as the "Bride of Christ." In this sense, the priest consecrates the eucharistic food while the Church prays over it. Lowrie's interpretation is quite different. He thinks that the man is Christ who consecrates the bread and fish of the eucharist. The *orant* is the soul of the one deceased who is "comforted with the Eucharist and confident in the almighty power of Christ."²⁷ Both understandings have validity. My own suggestion would be a synthesis of the two views. The man would be interpreted as an ecclesiastical figure, either priest or bishop, and the woman would be a symbol for the deceased soul. The overall meaning of the scene would be in terms of its relation to the hope of eternal life which participation in the eucharist expresses. The soul of the faithful has the promise of eternal life by reason of its fellowship within the Body of Christ and by partaking of its sacraments,

²⁶Rossi, op. cit., p. 267.

²⁷Lowrie, Monuments, p. 223.

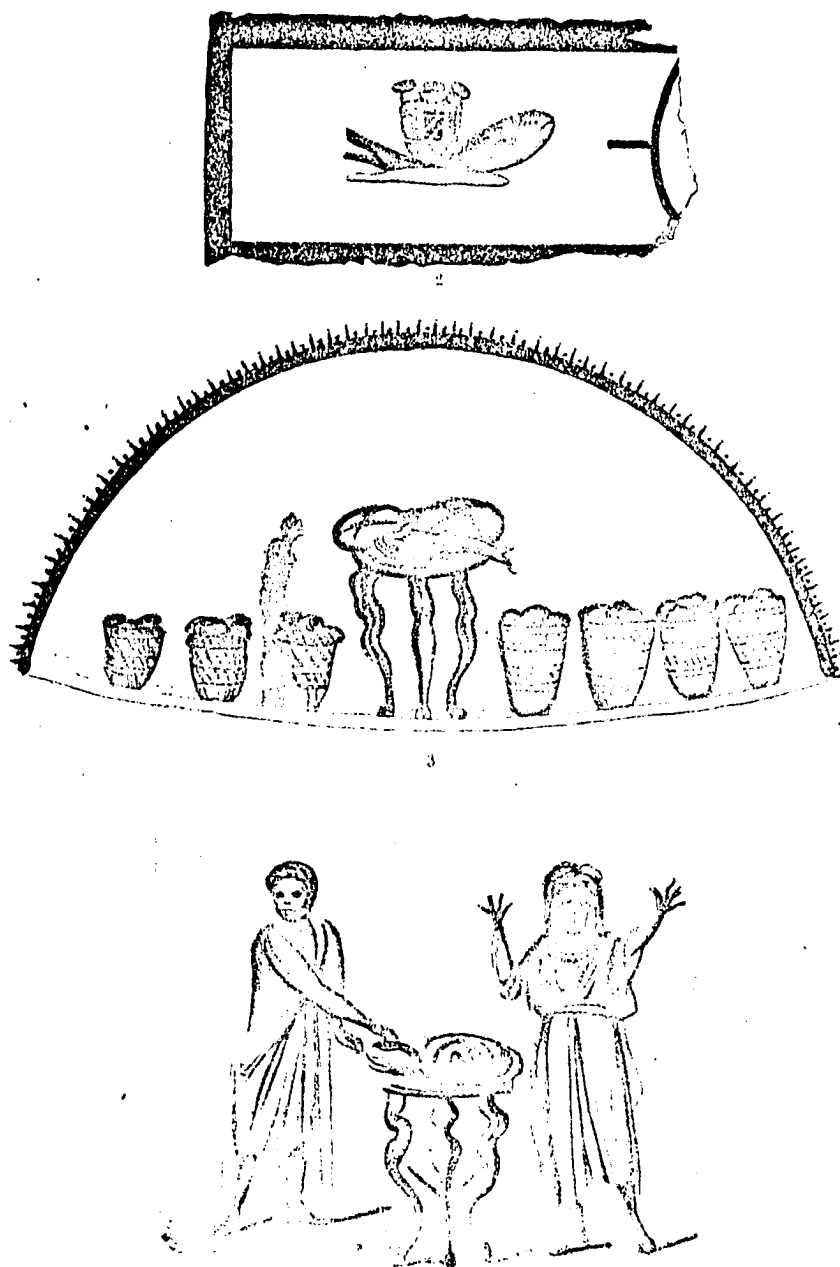


Figure 9. Eucharistic Frescos
(from De Rossi)

in this case, the eucharist. For this reason, such frescos have a particular meaning in these burial chambers of the catacombs.

This brief survey of the primary motifs of the catacomb frescos is a further indication of the extraordinary character and quality of this art. It is art which is positive in its expressions and fundamentally grounded in hope. The symbols which it displays are those which give the assurance of deliverance to the Christian and witness to the immortality of his soul. In essence, this art is vivid testimony to Paul's triumphant assertion in I Corinthians 15:55, "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" The ultimate symbol of this victory was, of course, Christ himself. It is to this christological emphasis that we now turn.

CHAPTER IV

CATACOMB CHRISTOLOGY

Plan of Study

In one sense all the paintings of the catacombs have a christological orientation. In one way or another, they all testify to the hope which was made manifest in Jesus as the Christ. Like the New Testament the frescos present "faith statement"; and the originator of that faith is Christ himself. Thus, Noah, Daniel and Jonah recall the person of Christ and are testimony to the power of God active in him. Thus, the *orant* and the "messianic banquet" remind the Christian of the reality of Christ's victory over death. Thus, the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist testify to the Christian's participation in the new humanity, a humanity of which Christ is the initiator and the Lord.

However, there are also those symbols which this early community chose as specific representations of the person and meaning of Christ. These were chosen for their explicit identification with Christ and generally display a consistency and uniformity in their application.

We speak of "symbols" for Christ. This is not to imply that the catacombs do not contain paintings of Christ nor realistic

portrayals of his life. There are such examples although they are not the most common and even the seemingly realistic ones have a symbolic quality inherent in them. The artists were not concerned with painting Christ's portrait per se. Those that do appear in the early period tend to be representative of the model for the ideal classic form. Many of these depict a beardless youth with the typically classical image. Only in the later periods of the fourth and fifth centuries does the more formal presentation emerge. This also coincides with the appearance of the crucifixion scenes which were not part of the earlier art. This later period reflects an increasing uniformity in the depictions of Christ so that it becomes possible to identify a figure as Christ with little difficulty. Such easy recognition was not always possible in the first few centuries.

This chapter is concerned with three basic symbols through which a significant christological emphasis was made. Two are inherently symbolic, even in their external appearance. These are the figure of the Shepherd and the Fish. The third symbol seems, at first, not a symbol at all but a series of realistic scenes from the life of Jesus. Yet, they are symbolic and the one scene is meant to recall a whole range of other activities. This is Christ as the "Miracle Worker" and the pre-eminent symbol for this activity is the "raising of Lazarus." Each of these symbols is presented and discussed in a separate section. Four main elements are included in each discussion.

- (1) A general description of the symbol.
- (2) The biblical background

of the symbol. (3) Any extra-biblical influences on the symbol.

(4) The christological meaning of the symbol.

The final section of the chapter is concerned with the particular perspective of catacomb christology in general. This section also includes a brief consideration of several significant omissions in christological symbolism. These omissions are symbols which have frequent reference in the New Testament but do not appear in the catacombs.

Christ the Shepherd

The figure of the Shepherd as a symbol for Christ is one of the most popular ones in catacomb art. It appears as early as the first part of the second century and is especially prevalent in the works of the second through fourth centuries. The form utilized for the presentation is relatively consistent and uniform. Yet, within this uniformity there is some notable variety.

The setting in which the Shepherd appears is, expectedly, a pastoral one. The Shepherd depicted in the scenes is representative of a typical Roman shepherd of the time. He is young, bare-headed and beardless. Often his legs and feet are also bare. However, in some instances, he is shown with shoes and leggings. His usual dress is the short, sleeveless tunic of the Roman working class. The right shoulder is frequently left bare in the style which was common to this group. The Shepherd carries a staff or a pipe or, occasionally, a milk pail. The number of sheep in the scenes varies as does their position with



Figure 10. The Good Shepherd
(from Wilpert)

regard to the Shepherd. The most common scene depicts the Shepherd carrying a sheep or goat upon his shoulders. After the fourth century, the frequency of the Shepherd image continually decreases and eventually is replaced by the symbol of the Apocalyptic Lamb.

The shepherd/sheep motif is a particularly important one in both the Old and the New Testaments. It reaches a culmination in John's great christological affirmation in 10:11, "I am the good shepherd." It is this assertion which has given the catacomb symbol its name and which basically governs its meaning. However, it is necessary to note briefly the Old Testament background for the symbolism as well as other important New Testament references prior to discussing the Johannine text.

The Psalms contain several of these pastoral images. Psalm 79:13 describes Israel as "the flock of thy pasture"; and image which is repeated in Psalms 95:7 and 100:3. Psalm 80:1 begins with a plea to God for help and addresses Him as "O Shepherd of Israel, thou who leadest Joseph like a flock!" The Shepherd image is most familiar in Psalm 23 where the Lord is specifically referred to as "my Shepherd" and mention is made also of the comfort from his "rod and staff." Isaiah 40:11 makes a similar comparison between God's care for His people and the shepherd's care for his flock, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young." In Ezekiel 34, there is a strong denunciation of "false shepherds" who "feed themselves" and not the sheep. This chapter also describes God's

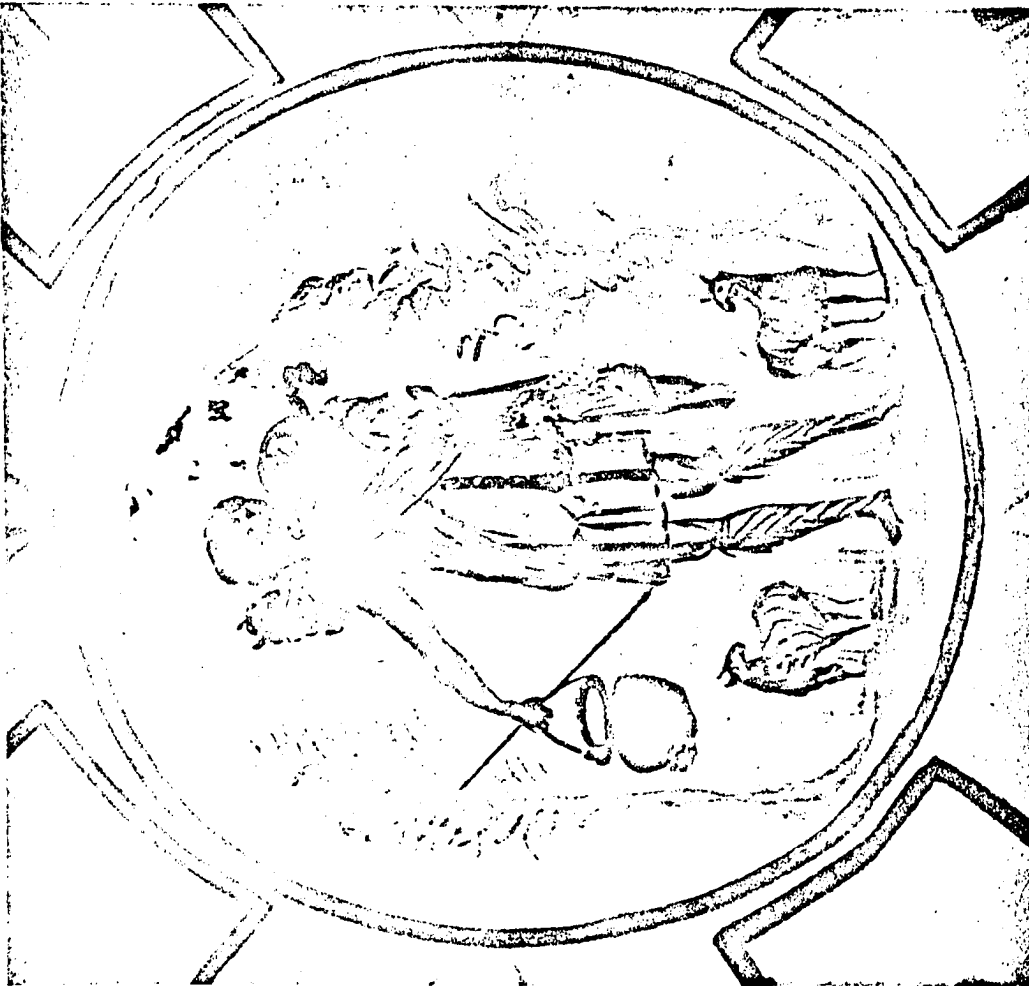


Figure 11. The Good Shepherd with
Milk Pail
(from Wilpert)

punishment of such shepherds, but, more importantly, asserts His promise toward Israel (His sheep). "For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. (34:11) I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. (34:15)" The chapter concludes with an eschatological promise in relation to the Davidic messiah. "And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. (34:23)" In light of this background and tradition it is not difficult to understand how the Shepherd image became one of the symbols for the Messiah. The symbol of the "Shepherd of Israel" is a familiar one in Jewish synagogue and catacomb art as well.

There is no question that the New Testament continued the Shepherd symbol in relation to Jesus as the Messiah. I Peter 2:25 speaks of "straying like lost sheep" and returning to the "Shepherd and Guardian of your souls." The image is re-enforced in I Peter 5:4 where the author gives commands for "tending the flock" so that when the "chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory." The closing benediction in Hebrews 13:20 contains an explicit reference to Jesus in this respect. "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep . . ."

Furthermore, the Gospels themselves are not without these Shepherd references. Mark 6:34 and Matthew 9:36 speak of Jesus' compassion on the people because "they were like sheep without a shepherd."

In Luke 12:32 Jesus is said to address his disciples with the words, "fear not, little flock." Of course, the fullest expression of this shepherd/sheep motif is set forth in John 10:1-18. There Jesus expressly refers to himself as the "good shepherd" and speaks of "laying down" his life for the sheep.

In addition to this wealth of biblical resources regarding the Shepherd symbol, the catacomb artists also had images furnished by the non-Christian environment. The Orpheus cycle is notable in this respect. Orpheus was also a shepherd and is represented in classical art in a manner similar to that of the Good Shepherd as described above. The lyre is particularly associated with Orpheus and this may help to account for the pipe which is so often placed in the hands of the Good Shepherd. Moreover, in the Orpheus legend there is a specific funeral reference which makes it especially applicable to the catacomb motifs. According to the myth, Orpheus was able to enter the lower world of death and lead back, through the power of his music, his wife from Hades. Thus, Orpheus is, in one sense, a symbol of deliverance for the pagan world. It is for this reason that he could become the classic model for Christ as the Shepherd.

A secondary classic model may be located in the pagan statues of Hermes Criophorus. In fact, Lowrie believes that it is from this model that the Shepherd is depicted carrying a goat rather than a sheep. Therefore, he feels that there is no essential difference intended by

the artists in the use of the goat rather than the sheep.¹ In contradistinction, De Rossi, among others, does ascribe a special significance to the use of the goat. He interprets the goat as a symbol of "protest against the hateful severity of the Novatians and other heretics refusing reconciliation to penitent sinners."² The goat would show that all are included in the Shepherd's care. Although it is true that goats were used to designate the "wicked" as in Matthew 25:31-46, this does not seem, to me, to be the intention in these scenes. Rather, Lowrie's explanation seems to be the more plausible. There is real danger in trying to symbolize every detail of a painting.

What then was the basic christological intent of the symbol?

Lowrie describes it in these words.

It represented, of course, the faithful care of the divine Shepherd in seeking the souls which had strayed into sin, and bearing them back to his Church; but it also represented his power to bear aloft to his heavenly kingdom the soul which was wounded, weary, and bruised with the struggle here below.³

Marucchi's interpretation reveals a similar understanding.

The most natural significance of the Good Shepherd is the charity of Jesus Christ, and even repentance, because He bears on His shoulders the lost sheep; but this figure also has a funerary meaning. In the ancient liturgy there was a prayer to the effect that the soul

¹Walter Lowrie, Art in the Early Church (New York: Pantheon, 1947), p. 41.

²Giovanni Battista de Rossi, Roma Sotterranea (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869), p. 287.

³Walter Lowrie, Monuments of the Early Church (New York: Macmillan, 1923), p. 218.

of the departed "might be carried on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd," which was followed by the mention of sheep and the heavenly Paradise.⁴

De Rossi's analysis is not markedly different although he does offer a clue as to a deeper level of symbolism which needs further consideration.

But in a still more special way our Divine Redeemer offers Himself to our regards as the Good Shepherd. He came down from His eternal throne in heaven into the wilderness of this world to seek the lost sheep of the whole human race, and having brought them together into one fold upon earth, thence to transport them into the ever-verdant pastures of paradise.⁵

Although the interpretations of these authors are not wrong, it seems to me that they miss altogether a particularly important aspect of the Good Shepherd image.

John 10:1-18 has been cited as the fundamental background for the Shepherd symbol. It is not possible, nor is it necessary, to do a detailed exegesis of the Johannine passage in this particular paper. However, several essential items need to be considered. Even a casual survey reveals the significant dependence of John on the Ezekiel passages and the parallel development of the good shepherd/false shepherd theme. Yet, John carries the imagery a step further. Jesus as the Good Shepherd gives his life willingly for his sheep. Both Titus⁶

⁴Orazio Marucchi, Manual of Christian Archeology (Patterson: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1935), pp. 275-76.

⁵Rossi, op. cit., p. 236.

⁶Eric Lane Titus, The Message of the Fourth Gospel (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), pp. 148-151.

and Barrett⁷ stress the importance of the crucifixion/resurrection motif contained in these verses. The key verse in this regard is 10:17, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again."

The difference between Jesus and the false shepherds is made clear in vs. 17, an allusion to Jesus' death and resurrection. Before this, in vss. 11 and 15, Jesus had compared himself to the hired man, who, in the presence of danger, leaves the sheep and flees. Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, differs from him in that he remains with the sheep and gives his life on their behalf. But his death is only half of the story. Death, apart from resurrection, would not distinguish him from many a leader who had gone before. So it is made clear that Jesus goes *voluntarily* to his death, knowing that he has the power to take it up again.⁸

This is Barrett's understanding also.

The thief takes the life of the sheep; the good shepherd gives his own life for the sheep. This feature of the story is not derived from the Old Testament or any other source, nor does it enter into the synoptic shepherd parables; it is based specifically upon the crucifixion as a known historical event.⁹

. . . the resumption of life was the intention behind the suffering of Jesus; he died that the power of his resurrection might be manifested and released.¹⁰

The concept of voluntary dying is not found in the Jewish messianic traditions with the possible exception of the "suffering servant" motif expressed in Isaiah. John's basic reason for its

⁷C. K. Barrett, The Gospel According to St. John (London: S.P.C.K., 1965), pp. 304-313.

⁸Titus, op. cit., p. 151.

⁹Barrett, op. cit., p. 311.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 313.

inclusion is christological. Jesus suffered and died; he did in fact "lay down his life for his sheep." Yet, in this act he was also "exalted"; that is, the cross as an instrument of death became an instrument of life through the power of the resurrection.

If modern biblical scholarship is not "reading into" the text when it asserts such an interpretation, then it is probable that the early Church understood the passages in a similar manner. It might be argued that the interpretation was part of an isolated Johannine understanding which was not widespread in the New Testament community. Thus, the artists would not have made the associations John did. However, that seems unlikely. The raising of Lazarus is a uniquely Johannine tradition. Yet it recurs frequently in the art. As noted earlier, a similar frequency is evident in the representation of John's feeding/eucharist parallelism. Therefore, it seems valid to assume that the Shepherd tradition was known and that the interpretations cited above are essentially correct.

What does this indicate about the christological meaning of the symbol in the catacombs? It seems extraordinary that the sacrificial aspect of the Good Shepherd image would have been overlooked or neglected by the early Christians. Particularly in those periods of persecution when they too were willingly "laying down" their lives. Moreover, John's inherent connection between the crucifixion and the resurrection makes the symbol even more triumphant.

This interpretation should not invalidate those which were cited earlier. The impact that this symbol has is, in part, determined

by its ability to incorporate several levels of meaning at the same time. What I am asserting is the opinion that the crucifixion/resurrection motif was also inherent in the Church's use of the symbol. Thus, the Good Shepherd as a christological symbol refers to Christ's care and concern for his Church (his sheep), but it also testifies to the manner in which that love was made manifest, namely through his death and resurrection. The symbol then becomes for the Christian community a reminder of his Passion and an assurance of new and eternal life through Christ as the "great Shepherd of the sheep."

The Miracle Worker

The scenes which comprise this symbol are, of necessity, varied. However, there are some marked consistencies as well. In each instance that he appears, Jesus is the central figure. It is his action which the artist wishes to emphasize. In fact, Lowrie notes that the subordinate position afforded the one receiving the "miracle" is emphasized by reducing the size of that individual in proportion to the figure of Jesus.¹¹ Thus Jesus is drawn much larger than the other figure(s). This has led some, mistakenly, to assume that the smaller figure is a youth or a child. Lowrie mentions this error especially in relation to those scenes depicting the healing of the blind man. These have sometimes been interpreted as the "blessing of the children."¹²

¹¹Lowrie, Monuments, p. 213.

¹²Ibid.

Moreover, not all the miracles of the New Testament are given expression in the catacombs. Even those that do appear are frequently expressed in very abbreviated forms. Thus, a particular phase of the story is used to recall the whole episode. It is for this reason that the frescos may be called symbolic. A single image serves to indicate a more complete teaching and message. In addition, one particular miracle is used to refer to the whole range of Jesus' activities in that area.

This section concentrates on three basic illustrations of the Miracle Worker theme. These are the healing of the blind man, the healing of the paralytic and the raising of Lazarus. Of the three, the last is the most frequently presented. It is also one of the most ancient and appears as early as the beginning of the second century in the Catacomb of Priscilla.

Although these three are among the most frequent of the miracles which are depicted, several others should also be mentioned. The woman healed of a flow of blood is a repeated scene in the art. It is based on the incident recorded Mark 5:25-34, Luke 8:43-48 and Matthew 9:20-22. The familiar account of Jesus and Jarius' daughter which appears in connection with the blood incident in the synoptics is not found in the catacombs. The resurrection motif is central to the Jarius accounts. However, it would seem that the artists preferred the more explicit expression of the resurrection supplied by the Lazarus story. The changing of the water into wine at Cana, the multiplication of the loaves and the feast of fishes are also portrayed in symbolic

form. These too are testimonies to Jesus' miraculous power but they have another significance as well. These three are symbolic representations of the eucharist and thus should most properly be discussed in reference to that sacrament.

The important scene depicting the healing of the paralytic appears in a very abbreviated form. The fresco shows simply a man carrying a bed. Jesus himself may or may not be represented. The scene is illustrative of the conclusion of the Gospel incident. The story is recorded in John 5:2-9, Mark 2:3-12, Matthew 9:2-8 and Luke 5:18-26. The Johannine and the synoptic accounts have different settings for the miracle but the result in each case is the same, "Rise, take up your bed." It is at this point that the artists put their focus. So familiar was the story that no other identification than the bed was needed. However, there can be little doubt that the artists intended the scene to symbolize the healing power of Jesus and were not concerned with just the story in and of itself.

A particularly interesting interpretation of this scene in connection with baptism is offered by De Rossi.¹³ The baptismal reference has support in Tertullian with the image of the "healing waters." This understanding sees the account as based on the Johannine version rather than the synoptic. De Rossi's analysis is also more possible when the painting is viewed from the perspective of its place in the "Sacrament Chapels." However, the scene also appears without the sacramental

¹³Rossi, op. cit., pp. 265-66.

background, particularly when it adorns the sarcophagi as it often does. Thus, in general it seems best to understand this in reference to the healing power of Christ rather than to the act of baptism.

The healing of the blind man is also depicted very simply. Jesus touches the eye of a man who, as noted, is usually drawn much smaller. The specific New Testament reference for this scene is uncertain. There are numerous instances which can be cited in support of its inclusion. Five specific healings of this nature are given in the Gospels. Two occur in Matthew, 9:27-30 and 20:30-34; two occur in Mark, 8:22-25 and 10:46-52; and one occurs in John 9:1-12. The Gospel of Luke does not contain a specific account of such a healing but does note in 7:21 that "on many that were blind he bestowed sight," Jesus' healing of the blind may also have even deeper significance in addition to its indication of his extraordinary power. In the account in Luke 4:16-21, Jesus takes the scroll in the synagogue and reads a passage from Isaiah 61. The Isaiah reference has been interpreted in terms of its messianic significance with the "recovering of sight to the blind" as an authentic sign of the Messiah in Jewish thought. Jesus declares in Luke 4:21, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." At one other instance in Luke 7:20-22 and once in Matthew 11:2-5, a similar "proof" is advanced as evidence of the authenticity of Jesus' messiahship. In each case the question is the same, "Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another?" The implied answer, supported in part by the healing of the blind, is that Jesus is the Expected One and that the messianic expectations are fulfilled in him.

The symbol of the blind healing thus has a significance beyond its testimony to Jesus as a Miracle Worker. It may be seen as a representation of the authenticity of the Christians' claim that Jesus is the Messiah. Thus, as a christological symbol it serves a double purpose; it is testimony to what Jesus did, but also to what he was.

The raising of Lazarus is frequently depicted in both the frescos and on the sarcophagi. It is also expressed in a simpler form among the inscriptions. In all instances, the presentation is essentially the same. Lazarus is shown wrapped like a mummy and standing in the opening of a temple-like tomb. Christ, often in the form of a beardless youth, stretches a rod toward him. Christ's dress is often that of the philosopher's *pallium*.

The Fourth Gospel account forms the basis for these frescos. The episode is recounted in John 11:1-44. The incident there centers on Jesus' discourse with Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, and climaxes with the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The Johannine account is unique and has no parallel in the synoptics. In the latter, Jesus' power over death is indicated, in part, by the stories of Jarius' daughter; an incident not found in John's Gospel. However, although the Johannine record seems to have furnished the source for the frescos, it was not used to supply the details. The text states that Lazarus was buried in a tomb described as "a cave" and there was "a stone upon it." The tomb pictured in the catacombs is typical of the above-ground burial structures commonly utilized by the Romans and not the underground chambers of the catacombs, nor the "cave" of the Johannine text.

Marucchi describes the variety of forms that this tomb may have in the Lazarus paintings.

Instead of the cave which St. John mentions, the painters of the catacombs depicted a mausoleum in the form of a temple, a *heroon*, because this could be drawn with greater ease and simplicity as was easier to understand. However, it assumes the most varied forms; at times it is only a few steps and a door on high; again it appears to be a small basilica with its own stairway, columns forming a triangular front and a nave with windows.¹⁴

Jesus' use of the rod is another detail which was added by the artists. The rod was meant as a symbol for power, especially power which was derived from God. It was in this sense that it was associated with Moses and the symbolism seems to have been carried over in relation to Jesus. A similar rod is depicted in the multiplication of the loaves and the wedding at Cana. The rod is not to be understood as a "magic wand" nor the instrument of Jesus' power. It merely was used to call attention to the act as a "miracle."

Of all the symbols and images in the catacombs, the raising of Lazarus would be the most expected. Indeed, one would be extraordinarily surprised if it did not appear. Its intent is clear. It is a direct and explicit testimony to Jesus as the Life-giver. He is the source of life and has the power to raise even the dead to new life. What could give more assurance? The witness of the Church, placed on the lips of Jesus, leave no doubt as to the christological emphasis intended, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me,

¹⁴Marucchi, op. cit., p. 308.



Figure 12. The Raising of Lazarus
(from Rossi)

though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

These symbols which depict Jesus as the Miracle Worker thus accomplish two things. One, they witness to his great power, a power that extends to the victory over death. Two, they testify to the validity of the Church's belief that this was indeed the "One who is to come."

The Fish

A most important and familiar symbol for Christ is that of the fish. Today this symbol is usually thought of as a simple line drawing. However, for the early Christian artists this was not generally the case. The fish symbol as it is used in the catacombs, especially as it appears in the frescos, has a distinctly realistic quality to it and displays a careful attention to detail.

The earliest use of the fish symbol seems to have been in connection with the anchor. The anchor, often a disguised form of the cross, was the early Christian symbol for hope. There is a basis for this symbolization in Hebrews 6:19 where the author draws a comparison with hope as the "anchor of the soul." By the end of the second century, it was common to depict a combination comprised of two fish and an anchor. This is usually interpreted in the form of the motto *Spes in Christo* (Hope in Christ). Morey questions this interpretation.¹⁵

¹⁵C. R. Morey, "The Origin of the Fish Symbol," Princeton Theological Review, X (1912), 278-298.

He establishes a primary distinction between the "fish-symbol" and "fish-symbolism." The latter is a "generic term" used to signify the use of the fish in a variety of applications. The former refers to the use of the fish as an "equivalent for Christ," not "indirectly" but as a "direct, absolute symbol." For this reason he rejects the idea of the two fish combined in a single type as a symbol for Christ although it does represent "fish-symbolism."

If the fish-symbol be considered thus it follows that *two* fish combined in a single type cannot belong to the above category. It is *the* Fish, not fish *in genere*, that stands for Christ, and it is inconceivable that the force of the equation should be weakened and the point lost by doubling the symbol.¹⁶

However, the fish is rarely used alone. Rather, it is usually found in combination with some other symbol(s). Among the most frequent combinations are the fish with the ship (church), the fish with the dove (peace) and the fish with the loaves of bread (eucharist). It is also found in association with a monogram for Christ or with a painting of the Good Shepherd. From the second century the fish as a symbol is frequently utilized by the catacomb artists and it is especially prevalent in the second through the third centuries. De Rossi notes a decrease in its use after this period and a lack by the fifth century.¹⁷

There is no specific New Testament text which accounts for the popular use of the fish as a symbol for Christ. Although there are

¹⁶Morey, op. cit., p. 278.

¹⁷Rossi, op. cit., p. 208.

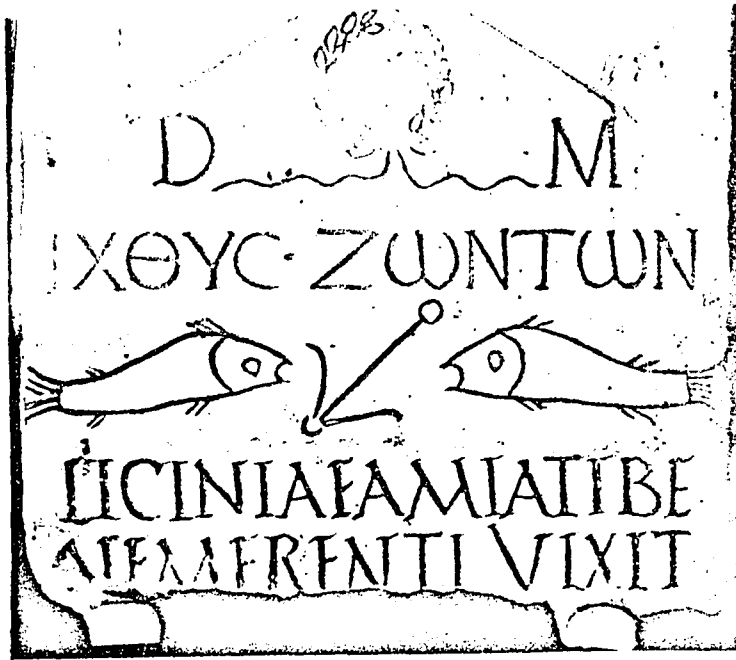


Figure 13. Fish and Anchor
(from Finegan)

numerous references to "fish" and "fishing" in the New Testament, none of these seems to be a sufficient source of the symbol. The most significant references in this respect probably were those specifically associated with the eucharist. As noted in Chapter III, the fish was an essential element in this celebration. The food eaten in that meal could have come to symbolize the Giver of that food also. On the other hand, the loaves of bread nor the jars of wine did not develop into symbols for Christ per se as did the fish. Therefore, it seems necessary to look outside the New Testament for the source of this development.

The first letter of each of the words Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior, when written in Greek, form the single word *ichthys* (fish). This acrostic is often cited as evidence for the popularity of the symbol. However, there exists a real problem in the association between the two in terms of their origin and development as a Christ symbol. In other words, which came first? Did the acrostic give rise to the fish symbol or merely re-enforce what was already in use? De Rossi discusses the chronological problem involved in connection with Clement of Alexandria.

We have already said that St. Clement of Alexandria is the earliest witness to the use of this symbol; and it is by no means improbable that the schools of Alexandria were really the first to originate it. The Church of that city was composed largely of converts from Judaism; and we know that nothing was more familiar to the Jews than the habit of coining names for their leaders or other great men, by

means of a combination of the initial letters of some other names, or legend, or motto, closely connected with them.¹⁸

Morey, on the other hand, posits a different origin.

To sum up, neither epitaphs, gems nor frescos present any evidence of the use of the symbol before the invention and first dissemination of the acrostic. There is every reason to suppose therefore that the fish as a definite symbol of Christ owes its origin to the **ΙΧΘΥΣ** acrostic and to that alone.¹⁹

However, Morey does note that the "fish-symbolism" was prevalent especially through the Eucharistic associations prior to the formation of the acrostic.

In addition, there are some interesting non-Christian influences and precedents for the use of the fish as a symbol. A frequent form in which the fish is depicted in the frescos is that of the dolphin. The dolphin was also popular in non-Christian art. He was particularly prized for his friendliness to men. However, there was also a specific place assigned to the dolphin in the pagan funeral cycle. For it was the dolphin who carried the dead souls to the islands of the blest.

Richardson summarizes the widespread use of the fish symbol in the ancient world.

Everywhere we seem to find fish. They form the fit sacrifice for the gods of the underworld. They are the offering for the dead in the cult of Adonis, and they are the symbol of luck and life in Syria and Mesopotamia. They are the holy food of the priests of Atargatis in Syro-Phrygia. They are the *coena pura* of the Jewish meal initiating the Sabbath. And from remote ages the Babylonian

¹⁸Ibid., p. 210.

¹⁹Morey, op. cit., p. 297.

priests of Oannes dressed themselves up as fish. Add to this the astral connection with the Pisces of the Zodiac, and we may say there was a good deal that was "fishy" about ancient religion in more sense than one.²⁰

However, Richardson himself rejects these influences as particularly decisive and believes that the essential thrust for the development of the fish as a symbol for Christ came from the Christian community itself.

When we consider the high significance of adult baptism in the Early Church, and the role that the baptism of Jesus played in the imagination of the early Christian, we can find a ready clue to the solution of our problem. Jesus was the God revealed in the water. In the earliest strata of the Gospel the baptism of Jesus is the event which determines His mission, gives Him the awareness of the Kingdom as now present in some sense in Himself, and, by the appearance of the dove, is the first Epiphany. Indeed, the feast of Epiphany originally celebrated the baptism, and certainly antedated the feast of Christmas. What connection would be more obvious than this; Jesus is the God revealed in the water, hence the sacred fish?²¹

Richardson's position contrasts sharply with that of Goodenough.²² Goodenough's study on the fish as a symbol reflects its widespread use in Judaism prior to its application in the Christian community. He discusses its place in Jewish tradition from four main perspectives: (1) as a symbol for the faithful, (2) in relation to the messiah, (3) as a sacramental food, and (4) as a symbol of the hope of

²⁰Cyril C. Richardson, "The Foundations of Christian Symbolism," in F. Ernest Johnson (ed.), Religious Symbolism (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), p. 6.

²¹Ibid., pp. 6-9.

²²Erwin R. Goodenough, "Fish, Bread and Wine," Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period (New York: Pantheon, 1956), V, 3-61.

immortality. His categories are strikingly similar to those which may be established in relation to the Christian understandings. Good-enough's conclusion is that the fish symbol had a basic Jewish orientation within the Christian community rather than a background in pagan thought.

The obvious, and only plausible, hypothesis to cover these scattered facts is that the Christian fish and the Jewish fish had the same value and that it was from Judaism that the Christians got the symbol, which, never fully appropriate, they had by the fifth century largely dropped even from their art.²³

Whatever its origin, there is an abundance of literary and artistic evidence which can be cited in support of the identification of Christ as the fish symbol. One of the most famous is the statement from Tertullian; it reflects an expansion of the symbolism to include the individual Christian as well as Christ himself. "We little fish, after the image of our Ichthys Jesus Christ, are born in the water, nor otherwise than swimming in the water are we safe."²⁴ The baptismal reference is clearly intended by the phrase "born in the water." Good-enough's studies uncover a particularly striking parallel at this point. He cites rabbinic tradition in support of the idea that the Jewish community also described itself in terms of "little fish swimming in water" and in relation to a "greater fish." He traces the tradition at least as far back as the time of Rabbi Akiba, which would be early in the second century. In Jewish tradition the "water of life" is the Torah

²³Ibid., v, 53.

²⁴Lowrie, Art., p. 75.

in which the Jew must live or he will die. In Christianity the water was baptism; but according to Goodenough, the "change did not work very well."

Inevitably this water in Christianity became the mystical water of baptism. The change did not work very well, for the baptismal water is something the Christian does not live in as the Jew lives in Torah. Dolger tried to avoid the difficulty by introducing the conception that the water of baptism was the Logos. But Terullian makes Christ not the water but the *Ichthys*, another and greater fish. Tertullian's statement is best understood as an offhand reinterpretation of a *façon de parler* inherited from Judaism, where the conception that the pious were fish had consistent meaning.²⁵

The multiplicity of meanings inherent in the fish symbol can be further demonstrated by reference to two important inscriptions. The first of these is from the third/fourth century. It is an epitaph for an individual who is designated as Pectorius of Autun. The first letter of each line forms the word *ichthys*.

Divine progeny of the heavenly Ichthys, receive with pious heart among mortals the immortal spring of divinely cleansing waters; refresh thy soul, my friend, with the perennial waters of the wisdom which maketh rich; receive the delicious food of the Saviour of Saints; eat, hungry one, holding Ichthys in thy two hands.²⁶

The baptism and eucharistic symbolism pertaining to the fish is explicit in the epitaph, as well as the express designation of Christ as the Ichthys.

The second inscription is earlier, probably from the second century. It is the epitaph of Abercius. Abercius was the bishop of Hieropolis, a small town in Phrygia. The inscription which in part

²⁵Goodenough, op. cit., pp. 34-35.

²⁶Lowrie, Art, p. 75.

describes his travels is cut into three sides of a burial pillar. The entire inscription is composed of twenty-two verses. Sections of the first and second sides are particularly important in relation to an understanding of the fish symbol.

My name is Abercius and I am a follower of the
Good Shepherd
Who pastures His flocks of sheep on the mountains
And in the meadows,
Whose eyes are large, seeing everywhere;
He has taught me the saving doctrines of life.

Having crossed the Euphrates, I went everywhere,
They discussed things with me in a familiar manner
Having Paul . . .
Faith, indeed was my guide everywhere
And she gave me at all times the great and pure Fish
from the deep
For food, Whom the Chaste Virgin conceived and
gave to friends
To be eaten perpetually,
Having the finest wine which was served combined
with water and bread.²⁷

The "Fish" in this reference seems to be both a symbol for Christ and for the eucharist; and understanding is made possible through "Faith."

The fish symbol thus incorporates several levels of meaning within it. It is a sacramental symbol pertaining to both the water of baptism and the food of the eucharist. In addition, it is the primary food of the "messianic banquet" and thus is representative of the promised age to come and the Kingdom of God. In its association with the anchor it signifies hope and with the dove, peace. It is utilized with the ship as a symbol for Christ and his Church. In the form of

²⁷Marucchi, op. cit., pp. 299-300.

the dolphin it symbolizes Christ's love and concern for his people and his promise to them of eternal life. All this from a single symbol.

Thus, its christological purpose cannot be scaled down to a single understanding. The pictorial symbol of the fish was not meant to convey one truth about Christ but several simultaneously. This is the problem inherent in Morey's dichotomy. It is precisely the point which he dismisses. The identification of Christ with the fish might well have come after its use as a eucharistic symbol. However, once that identification did occur the fish of the eucharist was endowed with a deeper level of meaning which would then always be present for the Christian viewer. The fish, at one and the same time, represented both the celebration and the one who initiated it and the line of distinction between them must be very finely drawn. A similar "double-function" can be discerned in the other combinations as well. Ultimately, the symbol of the fish is compatible with as many schools of thought and interpretation as is Christ himself and neither can be subsumed under any one category or understanding. Thus, Richardson is fundamentally correct in his conclusion.

The fish, then, means practically everything in the Early Christian faith. Baptism, Resurrection, Eucharist, and Kingdom are caught up into one central symbol. Through the fish the truths of the Faith are made a coherent whole.²⁸

This coherence has its essential form and substance only in the explicit and fundamental association of the fish symbol with Christ himself as Ichthys.

²⁸Richardson, op. cit., p. 9.

The Perspectives of Catacomb Christology

The basic perspectives of catacomb christology are not essentially different from those of the New Testament in general. A central thrust in both the catacombs and the New Testament is the affirmation and proclamation of Jesus as the Christ. He is the Expected One; in him is the fulfillment of the Old Testament messianic promises and hopes. He is the initiator of the new age symbolized by the Kingdom of God and the founder of a new humanity symbolized by the Christian community. The assertions of the catacombs and the New Testament are the same in these understandings, but their method of expression is quite different.

As was indicated in Chapter I, the New Testament is basically a literary approach to christology with a philosophical basis. Its symbolism is verbal and abstract rather than pictorial and concrete as is the symbolism of the catacombs where the basic approach is artistic. How would one represent the "Logos" in an art form? How does one depict Jesus' proclamation of imminent eschatology and the radical need for repentance in a single scene? The very nature of the artists' medium constrained them to utilize certain forms of their tradition and to reject others. There were other constraints as well.

The basic purposes which motivated the art also exercised a determining influence on its execution and expression. For this is art which was essentially conceived in terms of its association with the grave. Its expressions therefore are governed significantly by the Christian hope as revealed in a confrontation with the reality of death.

Thus, the symbols selected are those which are best representative of the hope of immortality. Whether that immortality was understood in terms of bodily resurrection or the immortality of the soul is relatively unimportant at this point. What is important is that the hope was real and was expressed in the art. As demonstrated in this chapter and also in Chapter III, each of the dominant symbols had a particular association with this theme of immortality. That relationship may have been direct as in the case of the sacraments, the Shepherd, the *orant* or the banquet. Or it may have been indirect as in the case of the Old Testament figures, the healing miracles and the fish symbols. Each of these symbols in some manner directed the viewer's attention toward the Christian proclamation of hope and eternal life through Christ. It is because Christ is the "author" of that hope that, in one sense, all the catacomb symbols are christologically oriented.

A further limitation on the art was imposed by the need for familiarity. If the artist expected the viewer to recognize and interpret the symbol correctly, then it would have to be familiar to him. It is for this reason that this art has been described as a reflection of "popular theology" rather than of official ecclesiastical dogma. The christological symbols chosen by the artists are therefore those most commonly utilized by the community in general. They are the ones with particular meaning and significance for, if the modern term may be inserted, the "layman" rather than the "priest."

This need for familiarity raises an important issue. At least two of the most dominant themes of the New Testament are not found in

catacomb art, namely the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. A third theme, that of the Nativity which is mentioned twice in the Gospels but is extremely common in the apocryphal literature, appears in the art in a most unusual form under the guise of the Magi. In view of the centrality of the first two themes for christology and ultimately for Christian faith in general, their omission is curious. Why were they not utilized?

One qualification must be made. These themes do appear in the art of the latter periods, particularly after the late fourth century. Indeed, in the later periods these become the dominant scenes in which Christ was depicted. Yet, during the early period, especially in the second through third centuries, their absence is conspicuous.

The Nativity scenes offer a suitable beginning at this point. As noted above, these find expression in the symbol of the Magi in an unusual manner. Both Lowrie and De Rossi mention the confusion which often results between depictions of the Magi and the "three children." This latter refers to the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who refused to worship the idol erected by the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar and were therefore placed in a "fiery furnace." The episode is recorded in Daniel 2:48-3:30. This fire scene is often illustrated in the frescos and on the sarcophagi. The dress for the Magi and the "three children" is much alike. Both are generally clothed in typical Phrygian costume which Lowrie indicates was "used in

Roman art to denote the inhabitants of the extreme Orient."²⁹ The dress would be more suitable for the Magi than for the three Israelites of Babylonia. Moreover, both scenes are often found in close proximity with one another. In fact, the juxtaposition is sometimes so close that the two scenes seem to merge so that the star of the Magi is placed above the heads of the "three children."

Lowrie suggests that this number three in the case of the Israelites may have had a strong influence on the number of Magi which were depicted.³⁰ For there are scenes in which the Magi are as many as four or more and as few as two. Two main reasons have been suggested to account for the Church's interest in this symbol. The first of these relates to its particular association with the Gentile community. "The Church from among the Gentiles showed a predilection for stories which illustrated the attraction which Christ exercised upon individuals outside the pale of Judaism."³¹ The second reason relates to the closeness in the nature of the persecution which is involved in the Daniel incident and in the Christians' own circumstances.

One point of connection was doubtless the refusal of the Magi to listen to Herod's command. But besides this there was a deeper thought, for Nebuchadnezzar was regarded as the type of the persecuting emperors, and it will be seen how admirably balanced these two subjects are when it is remembered that it was the refusal to worship the emperor instead of Christ which was the Christians' chief offence against the State, and the cause of the majority of martyrdoms. The star to which the Three Children point represents the true worship as opposed to idolatry, for it is the symbol of Christ.³²

²⁹Lowrie, Monuments, p. 210.

³⁰Lowrie, Art, p. 82.

³¹Ibid., p. 8.

³²Lowrie, Monuments, p. 211.

If these interpretations are correct, then the Church's interest was not in the Nativity of Christ per se, but in terms of the application which they accorded it for their own situation.

The cross must also be touched upon briefly in regard to its relative absence as a symbol. Scenes of Christ's crucifixion and passion do not appear until relatively late in the fourth/fifth centuries. However, a disguised form of the cross was in use somewhat earlier. Among these disguised forms were the following: the Greek Tau (Τ), the masts of ships, the crosspieces of the anchors and, perhaps, the position of the *orant*. De Rossi explains the special significance of the Tau form.

The number 300 being expressed in Greek by this letter Tau, came itself, even in apostolic times, to be regarded as an equivalent to the cross. We see examples of this in the inscription IREΤNE, lately discovered in a part of the Catacomb of San Callisto, belonging to the third century; and also in the monogram of ΤΥΡΑΝΙΟ in both of which the T is made prominent, evidently with a symbolical meaning. We even find the letter itself inscribed alone or in combination with the letter P, on a tombstone.³³

According to Lowrie, the "earliest representation of the crucifixion" appears in the form of a charicature.³⁴ The drawing is from the second century and was scratched on a wall in the Palatine. It depicts a crucifix with an ass's head. In front of the crucifix is a figure in a posture of adoration. The inscription reads, "Alexamenos adores God." Lowrie feels this drawing furnishes a clue as to why the Christians were reluctant to utilize the cross as a symbol.

³³Rossi, op. cit., p. 230.

³⁴Lowrie, Monuments, p. 237.

The only explanation that can be given of this fact is that the early Christians felt a particular distaste for the representation of the instrument which was still commonly in use, like our gallows, for the punishment of felons, as they showed in general a reluctance to depict our Lord's humiliation and passion. We can understand very well to what ridicule the public use of the cross would have exposed them.³⁵

At first such reasoning seems valid. However, there are several points of difficulty which require further consideration. It was stated in Chapter II that the catacombs were relatively private areas. Although their location was not secret from the outside world, those who saw the art, excluding perhaps that of the opening chambers and the first level, were members of the Christian community. Thus, there was no real need for secrecy as protection from public "ridicule."

It was suggested earlier that the symbol of the Good Shepherd may have supplied a crucifixion reference and reminder. Even so, it would have been hardly sufficient to act as the full replacement for the symbol of that act. Perhaps there is some answer to the dilemma in two aspects which have been mentioned previously. The first of these is dependent upon the concept of catacomb art as an expression of "popular theology." The earliest Gospel, that of Mark, struggles with the problem of the cross and the real suffering of Jesus which ends in his death. Paul's letters acknowledge the fact of the cross, of course, but for Paul the focus is on the resurrection as that which demonstrates the power of God and reveals Jesus as the Christ. Is it not

³⁵Ibid.

possible that popular thought in the early Church followed a similar pattern? Could not the fact of Christ's suffering and death have been a real problem for these Christians so that although they accepted it, they placed their primary focus elsewhere? This argument needs to be understood in relation to a second aspect, namely that the basic thrust of the catacomb expressions is in the direction of triumphant assertion rather than tragic acceptance. Theologically, the cross is a symbol of this triumph, but popularly, it might not have been so.

In regard to the resurrection of Christ there is little to be said. In the art it is not there, at least not until after the fourth century. Yet, resurrection, as symbolized explicitly in the Lazarus frescos, was the central theme of all catacomb art. Perhaps it was so obvious that it did not need expression. Whatever the reason, the artists did not choose to depict it.

Yet those symbols which they did choose are fundamentally assertions of the victory which Christ's resurrection essentially reflects. Goodenough's remark is most apt in this respect. "What the early Christians were doing in catacombs, mosaics, and sarcophagi alike was to present their faith."³⁶ Thus, the symbols of the catacombs are witness to the hope of the early Christian community and to the faith which sustained them. It is a faith grounded and directed by their assertion that Jesus is the Christ.

³⁶Erwin R. Goodenough, "Catacomb Art," Journal of Biblical Literature, LXXXI:2 (1962), 113-42.

There is a rich heritage in faith and symbolism here to be claimed by the contemporary Christian community. The real dilemma confronting us then is the problem of how to appropriate this mode of symbolic expression for our own use and so derive symbols which reflect our own faith in Christ.

CHAPTER V

CHRISTOLOGY AND THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

The Perspectives of this Chapter

Thus far this study has been primarily concerned with the early Christian community and the symbolic expressions of its faith as viewed from the perspective of the art forms of the Roman catacombs. This chapter has a different focus. It is concerned with the contemporary Christian community and the means by which it may utilize forms of symbolic expression related to its own faith. Specifically, its concern is with the forms related to the expression of christological truths. My thesis is that there is a viable and authentic approach to christology through the medium of the visual symbol as well as through that of the verbal. The presuppositions and the fundamental basis for such an approach are presented in this chapter.

One point requires special emphasis. I do not wish to imply that a literary-philosophical approach to christology is invalid and has nothing to offer the Church. On the contrary, the reverse is true and such approaches will continue to be valid and valuable. However, I feel that the Church has neglected an equally valuable tool and resource for the expression of its faith. The approach I suggest has its value as a complementary option, not as an alternative one. The

approach I suggest is grounded in symbolic imagery and expressions. The Church has neglected this as a potential expression of christology in one of two ways. Either the symbols are ignored as obsolete and meaningless, or they are analyzed and interpreted to the point where they are no longer symbols but have become virtually concepts and abstractions. It is at this point that I would suggest the need for change.

However, before such change can occur, one must have some understanding of the nature and function of religious symbolism and its specific relation to the christological problem. Several significant understandings concerning the nature and function of symbols in general and religious symbols in particular, are presented and discussed in the first section of this chapter. This is done with the specific intention of discovering their relation to the problem of christological expression through symbolism.

The second section of the chapter is an attempt to derive insights gained from the study of catacomb art which might then be applied to the fundamental problem of christological expression in the Church. Its concern is with the appropriation of this form of expression for us in the Church.

The final section of the chapter is an examination of several directions in which christology may be expressed through the medium of symbolic imagery. In other words, how does one approach the problem of christology through the visual symbol in addition to that of the verbal conceptualization?

Religious Symbolism and the Christological Problem

Man communicates through signs and symbols. They are the fundamental tools of his communication process. The symbol therefore is, first and foremost, a means of communication. The problem arises in the attempt to determine what a symbol communicates and how it does it.

From the beginning it is necessary to distinguish between the "symbol" and the "sign."

A sign indicates the existence--past, present or future--of a thing, event or condition.

A natural sign is a part of a greater event, or of a complex condition, and to an experienced observer it signifies the rest of that situation of which it is a notable feature. It is a *symptom* of a state of affairs.¹

In addition to these "natural signs" there are those which are "produced" and then purposely correlated with things, events and conditions. The relationship between these "artificial signs" and their objects is basically the same as that which exists for the "natural signs" and its objects.

The logical relation between a sign and its object is a very simple one, they are associated, somehow, to form a *pair*; that is to say, they stand in a one-to-one correlation. To each sign there corresponds one definite item which is its object, the thing (or event, or condition) signified.²

On the other hand, according to Langer, the fundamental relationship between the "symbol" and its object is quite different.

¹Susanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key (New York: New American Library, 1942), p. 58.

²Ibid., p. 59.

Symbols are not proxy for their objects, but are *vehicles for the conception of objects*. To conceive a thing or a situation is not the same thing as to "react toward it" overtly, or to be aware of its presence. In talking *about* things we have conceptions of them, not the things themselves; and *it is the conceptions, not the things, that symbols directly "mean."*³

May's statement reveals a second level of difference between the "symbol" and the "sign" this time in their relationship to the user.

I would suggest that the difference between a "sign" and a genuine "symbol" lies at this point: when a word retains its original power to grasp us, it is still a *symbol*, but when this is lost it deteriorates into being only a *sign*; and by the same token, when a *myth* loses its power to demand some stand from us, it has become only a *tale*.⁴

What then is the essential nature of the symbol?

Langer establishes two basic categories or types of symbols, the "discursive" and the "presentational." Discursive symbolism is most directly associated with the category of verbal expression. The discursive symbol draws its meaning from the structure of language and is thus ultimately dependent upon it.

As it is however, all language has a form which requires us to string out our ideas even though their objects rest one within the other; as pieces of clothing strung side by side on the clothesline. This property of verbal symbolism is known as *discursiveness*; by reason of it, only thoughts which can be arranged in this peculiar order can be spoken at all; any idea which does not lend itself to this "projection" is ineffable, incommunicable by means of words.⁵

³Ibid., p. 61.

⁴Rollo May, "The Significance of Symbols," in his Symbolism in Religion and Literature (New York: Braziller, 1960), p. 17.

⁵Langer, op. cit., p. 77.

Presentational symbolism, on the other hand, is non-verbal in its orientation and depends on sensory awareness rather than language for its meanings.

In the non-discursive mode that speaks directly to sense, however, there is no intrinsic generality. It is first and foremost a direct *presentation* of an individual object.⁶

Langer's category of presentational symbolism has particular significance for the understanding of the religious symbol as an artistic form. Visual symbols are essentially and inherently "non-discursive" since they present themselves to the viewer as a coherent whole rather than as a series of units with independent meanings. There is a quality of totality about their presentation which is not found in the verbal symbol.

Fromm's analysis is an additional means by which to understand the different types of symbols which exist. He distinguishes between three kinds of symbols: the "conventional" and the "accidental" and the "universal."⁷ The first, that of the "conventional" has "no inherent relationship" with the object it symbolizes. It is custom which has established the association and the relationship is accepted by the society making that association. The "accidental" symbol also has no intrinsic relationship with its object. The experience of the individual, often only a private one, is what determines the nature and

⁶Ibid., p. 89.

⁷Erich Fromm, The Forgotten Language (New York: Rinehart, 1951), p. 13-23.

meaning of the symbol. The third type, that of the "universal" symbol, does have this inherent and intrinsic relationship between that which is symbolized and the symbol for it. It is a basically unrestricted symbol in that its meaning extends beyond both the individual and the group.

It can be called universal because it is shared by all men, in contrast not only to the accidental symbol, which is by its very nature entirely personal, but also to the conventional symbol, which is restricted to a group of people sharing the same convention. The universal symbol is rooted in the properties of our body, our senses, and our mind, which are common to all men, and, therefore, not restricted to the individuals or to specific groups. Indeed, the language of the universal symbol is the one common tongue developed by the human race, a language which it forgot before it succeeded in developing a universal conventional language.⁸

It is perhaps significant that Fromm cites the account of Jonah as an example of these universal symbols incorporated in a story form. As noted earlier, the Jonah theme was a popular one among the catacomb artists.

Richardson's approach to the nature of a symbol is in terms of its functions.⁹ His understanding, in part, is derived from the etymology of the word itself. The term "symbol" derives its meaning from the Greek form of the verb, "symbollo," which may be translated as "to bring together." Richardson cites three basic functions which are

⁸Ibid., p. 18.

⁹Cyril C. Richardson, "The Foundations of Christian Symbolism," in F. Ernest Johnson (ed.), Religious Symbolism (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), pp. 3-5.

accomplished by a symbol. "First, it is the means by which something is made intelligible or accessible to us."¹⁰ The symbol provides unity and coherence so that an understandable pattern is established. Elements which seem unrelated are brought into a relationship which gives meaning to the whole. "But the symbol 'brings together' in a second way. It is the cohesive factor in a society."¹¹ A symbol provides direction and shape to the patterns of belief and conduct within a society. It establishes a basic core of meaning for individuals within that society. "Yet in a third way the symbol 'brings together.' Perhaps its most marked characteristic is its capacity to comprehend an almost infinite variety of meanings and relationships."¹² The symbol is thus capable of incorporating within a single expression a multiplicity of interpretations which are both valid and authentic. It is this third function which provides the religious symbol with its ultimate potential as a vehicle for religious truth but it is also the source of its essential difficulty.

Tillich's analysis is most directly concerned with the problem and nature of religious symbolism. Are the religious symbols subject to the same kinds of criteria and analysis as are other symbols? What distinguishes a "religious" symbol from a "non-religious" one?

Tillich establishes four basic characteristics in which all symbols participate. These are: "figurative quality," "perceptibility",

¹⁰Ibid., p. 3.

¹¹Ibid., p. 4.

¹²Ibid., p. 5.

"innate power" and "acceptibility."¹³ The "figurative quality" of a symbol refers to the fact that a symbol is not that which it symbolizes but that it directs one toward "that which is symbolized in it."¹⁴ "perceptibility" refers to the fact that the something which is "intrinsically invisible, ideal or transcendent" is made perceptive, it is objectified by the symbol.¹⁵ In other words, the symbol is able to depict what ultimately cannot be depicted by giving it an objective reference. The characteristic of "innate power" is, according to Tillich, "the most important one." Essentially it is this quality which distinguishes the "symbol" from the "sign." The sign is "impotent" in itself, it is "interchangeable" and does not "arise from necessity."¹⁶ The opposite is true of the symbol.

The symbol, however, does possess a necessary character. It cannot be exchanged. It can only disappear when, through dissolution, it loses its inner power. Nor can it be merely constructed; it can only be created. Words and signs originally had a symbolic character. They conveyed the meaning which they expressed, with an inherent power of their own. In the course of evolution and as a result of the transition from the mystical to the technical view of the world, they have lost their symbolic character, though not entirely. Once having lost their innate power they became signs.¹⁷

Finally, the symbol possesses "acceptibility" in that it is "socially rooted and socially supported."¹⁸ The community using the symbol agrees to what it is and what it is meant to communicate. All symbols share

¹³paul Tillich, "The Religious Symbol," in May, op. cit., pp. 75-77.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

in these characteristics and the religious symbols are no exception. However, there are distinguishing qualities between the specifically religious symbol and those which are "non-religious."

The primary mark of distinction is located in the ability of the religious symbol to point beyond itself to the level of ultimate reality while at the same time participating in that reality. In one sense, it is a matter of degree, for all symbols have this quality of "participation" and "beyondness." It is the criteria of transcendency and ultimacy which designates a symbol as "religious" rather than "non-religious." Which would seem to indicate that all conventional so-called religious symbols are, in actual practice, not that at all.

The religious symbol has special character in that it points to the ultimate level of being, to ultimate reality, to being itself, to meaning itself. That which is the ground of being is the object to which the religious symbol points. It points to that which is of ultimate concern for us, to that which is infinitely meaningful and unconditionally valid. Religious experience is the experience of that which concerns us ultimately. The content of this experience is expressed in religious symbols.¹⁹

Tillich further distinguishes among religious symbols themselves by assigning them to one of two levels.²⁰ The first level contains the "objective religious symbols" and the second is composed of the "self-transcending religious symbols." Tillich subsumes three additional types under the first level, the third of these is the most important in terms of this study. The first two are composed of those symbols

¹⁹Paul Tillich, "Theology and Symbolism," in Johnson, op. cit., pp. 109-110.

²⁰Tillich, "The Religious Symbol," op. cit., pp. 89-98.

related to the "religion object," divine beings of the "Supreme Being" and also those symbols which characterize the nature and actions of God as Supreme Being.

The third group is comprised of the "natural and historical objects that are drawn as holy objects into the sphere of religious objects and thus become religious symbols."²¹ Historical personalities are especially included in this classification in that they point beyond themselves to the ultimately real. Moreover, these are real personalities and authentic historical beings with an empirical reality to their substance and activity. At the same time however, they are symbols, because they represent, in the empirical realm, that which is ultimately transcendent. They are transparent figures and it is this transparency which gives them their symbolic character. It is in this sense that Tillich speaks of "pointing significance"; for that to which they direct the attention is the "unconditional transcendent."

It is at this point, that one confronts what might be termed "a christological dilemma." For if we take seriously Tillich's analysis, then it is not only possible, but necessary that Christ himself be understood as a symbol. Indeed, Tillich makes such an understanding explicit. "It is therefore correct to say that Christ or the Buddha, for example, in so far as the unconditioned transcendent is envisaged in them, are symbols."²² Thus, the final and most real christological symbol is Jesus himself. Using Tillich's analogy, when John has Jesus

²¹Ibid., p. 92.

²²Ibid., pp. 92-93.

say, "He who has seen me has seen the Father," we might better read, "he who has seen *through* me has seen the Father." Jesus is the Christ in that the Ultimately Real is revealed in and through him. Jesus is the authentic symbol of the Christ, but the Christ is, in return, a symbol for the redeeming power and love of God. However, it must be remembered that therefore neither Jesus nor Christ as symbols are that which they represent, their function is to point beyond themselves to that Ultimate Reality which from the perspective of the Christian faith is God himself. Such an assertion has far reaching implications for the understanding of christology and for the Christian life style.

It may be argued that this makes the whole area of christology "unimportant" because Jesus as the Christ is "only a symbol." It would be correct if it had been stated that Jesus as the Christ was a "sign." However, the basic difference between the two is that, as noted above, a symbol has real power and participates in the reality which it reflects, and a sign does not. The power of the symbol, Jesus Christ, resides in its very transparency and only so far as that transparency is maintained does the symbol maintain its inherent power. In this sense also, it can be said that God and his Christ are one, in that the symbol participates in the Reality which it reflects. In this sense also, Jesus the Christ functions as a religious symbol. "Religious symbols open up the mystery of the holy and they open up the mind for the mystery of the holy to which it can respond."²³ Jesus as

²³Tillich, "Theology and Symbolism," op. cit., p. 111.

the Christ has this capacity to "open up the mind for the mystery of the holy" and to call forth a response from being to Being. The visual symbol is one means of approach through which this capacity may be made manifest in the Christian community.

Contributions from the Catacombs to the Problem

The catacombs as has been demonstrated contain a wealth of artistic and visual symbols. These symbols are fundamentally religious as measured in terms of Tillich's criteria. Their function is to direct attention beyond themselves to the source of the faith which produced them. They are "other-directed" and that Other is God Himself. Moreover they are specifically christological symbols in that they witness to the fact that it is in Christ that God has been revealed in the most visual and explicit manner possible.

The contemporary Christian community shares this faith with the early Church. However, it cannot merely appropriate these symbols and expressions for its own by a simple process of repetition. They cannot be "carried over" from the walls of the catacombs to the walls of the contemporary Churches. For these symbols express the specific needs and concerns of a particular community with a particular perspective. Although the contemporary Christian community can identify with many of these needs and concerns, our perspective or "world view" is not fundamentally the same. A pastoral symbol has real difficulty maintaining its vitality in an essentially urban one. And a community grounded in "demytholization" has real difficulty in apprehending the reality of a

confrontation between man and dragon or man and sea-monster. Nor can the Church consciously develop new symbols to replace those which the early Church presented in its art forms.

Theology can neither produce nor destroy religious symbols. They are that which is *given* to theology; it is not God that is given, but the symbols of the encounter between God and man. As such, they are the objects of theology.

What theology can do with these symbols is to conceptualize them, to explain them, and to criticize them--these three things. But theology cannot produce them and cannot destroy them.²⁴

It is in this area of "conceptualizing, explaining, and criticizing" that the study of catacomb art can have its authentic and viable impact on the Church today. For the contemporary Church is not without symbols, visual as well as verbal. They adorn her walls, her bulletins and her altars. Some of these are only given "eye service" such as the "lamb" or the "Shepherd" or the "fish." Others, like the eucharistic elements still have a relatively important part in the life of the Church. Interestingly, the same expression can be a "sign" in one Church and a real "symbol" in another. Thus, the problem is not that the Church has no symbols, but that those which it does have, have either lost their power as symbols or are not recognized as such.

The problem occurs in this respect because the symbol has become "opaque" and the view through is no longer possible. At this point, the symbol has often developed into an end in itself. This failure to function properly derives from two main sources. First, it

²⁴Ibid.

is the fault of the symbol itself. That is, it tends to limit the imagination of the viewer. It is too literal a representation, it can be too directly applied and too exactly interpreted. In other words, it isn't really a symbol, but has been asked to function as such. Secondly, it is the fault of the viewer himself. That is, once he has grasped some essential truth which is revealed through the symbol, he seizes upon IT as that truth and refuses to let the symbol perform its essential function. Thus, in order to remain valid, a symbol must continually defy the rigid framework of absolute interpretation and continually point the viewer in the direction of the Ultimate to the deeper dimensions of reality and human experience. It is by no means a simple task.

It is at this point that the catacomb expressions are most helpful. For it is possible, on the basis of a study such as this, to derive certain specific "guidelines" or "criteria" against which the Church may measure, evaluate and understand its own symbols. The criteria may be applied to all religious symbols, but I am here concerned with specifically christological ones. I would propose six such guidelines derived from the study of early Christian art. Furthermore, the fish symbol is utilized as a consistent example against which to measure the validity of the criteria suggested. The symbol was chosen for two reasons. First, it was prevalent in the ancient Church and secondly, it seems to be gaining in significance in the contemporary Church although it is by no means as powerful a symbol as it once was.

1. The symbol must be real. By "real" I mean that it must actually symbolize that for which it is intended. A symbol cannot be artificially created to represent something in which it has no inherent participation. Symbol and object, although not the same, must be intimately related. The fish was a real symbol in an extremely basic manner. Fish were an important ingredient in the celebration of the eucharist. The sacrament was the means of participation in the Body of Christ. Thus, the fish became the symbol of that participation while at the same time it was the means in which the participation was achieved.

2. The symbol must reflect the real needs of the community which it serves. A symbol cannot be imposed from the outside, but must develop in response to perceived needs and concerns. It is in this sense that a symbol may be termed a "popular expression." However, this presupposes that the community recognize its needs and also the symbols by which it responds to them. The fish symbol reflected a multiplicity of needs from the hope for immortality to the need for identification as members of the Christian fellowship. Significantly, fish supplied the early community with an essential source of food and livelihood. Viewed from the perspective of faith, the fish took on new dimensions as a source of food and existence. Both these needs are real and the fish symbol is not artificially related to their fulfillment.

3. The symbol must be simple and consistent. This is particularly related to the development of visual symbols, but it has value in other instances as well. The symbol must be able to reveal its message immediately to those within the community using it. One should not have to wonder what it means. Thus, its intent must be recognizable in the expression which it manifests. Complex symbols are confusing because they tend to allow distraction and ambiguity to distort the basic meaning. Moreover, simple symbols, particularly simple visual ones are much easier to remember than are complex ones. The fish was immediately identifiable as such. Moreover, it was applied with consistency. It did not mean one thing in one scene and something entirely different in another. Visually it was easy to reproduce and recognize.

4. The symbol must be flexible enough to incorporate more than one level of meaning in it. It must allow for a multiplicity of understandings. This may seem contrary to what has just been asserted in the above paragraph, but it is not meant to be. A symbol may maintain its basic unity and integrity without confining itself to a single level of interpretation. The fish as a symbol for Christ contained within it a variety of meanings. It conveyed at one and the same time, several aspects of Christ's person and work. On the other hand, it did not attempt to incorporate diametrically opposed meanings within its single expression. In other words, a symbol must have a direction to point to which is clearly indicated even though it may include more than one dimension of that direction.

5. The symbol must be understood by the community. Very simply, this means that it must be familiar. To be valid a symbol must be grounded in the traditions and common experiences of the community using it. And this includes present experiences as well as past traditions and future hopes. This presupposes, however, that a group is aware of its heritage in these instances. One must know why the symbol has the form it does as well as what that form means. Symbols which are not familiar need to be explained rather than recognized. The fish was an essential part of the Jewish-Christian experience. Grounded in Judaism, the Christian convert would understand almost immediately how the fish symbolized his new existence and his relationship to Christ. Gentile converts with a different orientation had a point of contact with the fish as a symbol which made it intelligible to them as well. Both groups could thus grasp the "why" of Christ as Ichthys as well as identify with the authenticity of the assertion.

6. The symbol must be directed by faith. In order to be a valid religious symbol it must be an authentic witness to the faith of the community of which it is a part. It must serve as a visible means of expression of the claims asserted by that faith. This, of course, presupposes that the community has an adequate and vital understanding of the faith which it professes. Once this is attained, it can focus its attention of those symbols which best reflect that stance rather than those which may violate it. The fish as a symbol for Christ was rooted in the fundamental assertions of early Christianity. Christ was

Life-Giver and Life-Sustainer. He was the source of the sacramental power and the expression of hope and salvation. The fish symbol testified visually to those claims without distorting or obscuring them.

The fish is thus one symbol which may be evaluated positively in terms of these basic criteria. A similar pattern could be followed with the other catacomb symbols as well. However, it must be noted that all symbols which externally fit these criteria do not necessarily have vitality. On the other hand, a symbol which violates these standards is not likely to have much of an impact in the life of the Church. The ultimate criteria seems to rest in the response of the community to the symbol as such.

This is particularly true with respect to christological symbols where the basic intent is to "call forth" a response from the community. At this point, an approach to christology through symbolism can have its greatest significance and value.

An Approach to Christology Through Symbolism

The early Christian community approached its christology from several directions and through several sources. The New Testament itself reflects not one christology but several christologies. Moreover, there is often considerable difference and tension among these multiple perspectives. And this tension cannot be synthesized nor harmonized away. Paul does reflect a different understanding of Christ than does John, and John's understanding is not the same as that of Mark. Most

assuredly, there are points of similarity and consistency among them, but there are essential and irreconcilable differences as well.

Moreover, one approach may itself reflect these inherent inconsistencies and apparent contradictions. The Fourth Gospel is a particularly good example in this respect. Furthermore, it is a most significant example in that it is this Gospel, which, more than any other, finds a predominant expression in catacomb art. There is a definite reason for its popularity. At the core of John's literary method is the strategy of symbolic expression. The symbols in this Gospel reveal a variety of forms. At first glance, some of these seem in direct opposition to one another, or at least at cross-purposes. At one time Jesus is the "water" (4:7-15) and at another he is identified with the "wine" (2:1-1). He is the Shepherd (10:11), the "door of the Sheep" (10:7) and the "Lamb" (1:29). Yet, John's Gospel can incorporate these diverse images and many more, without losing its essential integrity and unity. It is able to do this precisely because no image or symbol is regarded by the author as an end in itself or as a sufficient expression of his message. Rather, the symbols are directed toward one end; to focus the attention on Jesus as the Christ and thus as the revelation and incarnation of God. John understood that no single symbol could accomplish this. Thus, he selected a number of symbols, each of which expressed a fundamental aspect of his christological understandings. When these are brought together under his common purpose, they form a coherent and unified whole, which presents Jesus as the Christ of God. It is in this sense that he has been called a true

"artist." I think that it is particularly noteworthy that many of John's most important symbols for Christ are what Fromm would categorize as "universal" symbols; Christ as "light," "water of life," "bread" and the "one from above."

As has been shown in this study, early Christian art operated in a similar manner with similar principles. Several aspects of the community's understanding of Christ are expressed in the catacomb symbols under a common purpose. They saw no contradiction in referring to Christ through a series of diverse images. He was the Shepherd and he was Ichthys at one and the same time. Fundamentally, Christ is both and yet he is neither. Carried to its literal and logical extremes, there are limits to this symbolism. Jesus was a carpenter, he was not a shepherd, and human beings are not sheep. Nor was Jesus a fish, he was a man and a man is not eaten in the eucharistic meal. On the other hand, both symbols as we have seen, refer to significant aspects of the Church's christologies. In this they are valid, but they are not ends in themselves.

The contemporary Christian community, however, does not seem to have grasped this essential difference. There seems to be a real reluctance, almost a fear, in the Church to express its christologies in the form of symbols which are openly and honestly acknowledged as such. In this they lack the freedom of the early community. Rather, there seems to be a real need to either abolish symbols because they are inadequate or to "get behind the symbol" and deal only with what it represents. The latter especially is a totally incorrect perception of

what a symbol is and does. Symbols must be "intellectually respectable" in the Church or they are unacceptable. I am not suggesting that inadequate or obsolete symbols should not be abolished. However, I think one must first raise the fundamental questions as to why they are inadequate and how they became obsolete. If they are not adequate because they cannot comprehend the totality of Christ's work or person in a single expression, or if they are obsolete because we do not know what they represent, then perhaps what is required is some serious reconsideration and examination on the part of the community whose faith they were meant to express.

The symbol's power resides in the totality of the impact which it has on the viewer. This is particularly true with respect to the artistic symbol.

I may use as an example the symbolic power of art, for instance of visual art. The symbolic power of visual art is not that special symbols are painted (as is true of bad art) but that if you paint a picture, whatever the content of it may be, a landscape, or a portrait, or a story, it expresses a level of reality to which only the artistic creation has an approach. We never would see it if art did not reveal it to us.²⁵

It was for this reason that Langer referred to visual forms as presentational rather than discursive.

The most radical difference is that *visual forms are not discursive*. They do not present their constituents successively, but simultaneously, so the relations determining a visual structure are grasped in one act of vision. Their complexity, consequently, is not limited, as the complexity of discourse is limited, by what the mind can retain from the beginning of an apperceptive act to the end of it.²⁶

²⁵Ibid., p. 109.

²⁶Langer, op. cit., p. 86.

Although the mind is involved in the utilization of the artistic symbol, there are other levels of perception which are operating as well. Significant among these are the levels of sensory and emotional awareness. One responds to art with a totality of being, not merely with the cognitive processes of the mind. Picasso's modern art forms are an example of this kind of response. Even without an intellectual understanding, there is a sensory response called forth by the paintings. This explains also why the liturgies of many of the "higher" Churches can continue to have such an appeal even without a corresponding intellectual agreement. It is for this reason also, that the "multi-media" presentations are finding an increasing place in the worship of the Church. For these exploit the sensory and emotional awareness of the congregation through which to make fundamental Christian assertions. The medium of the film is especially interesting in this respect. It is a medium of visual expression which has a potential for an impact much like that of the catacombs. Two particular films are especially noteworthy in regard to their basic christological intent. The two are "Parable" and "The Antkeeper." Both are basically allegories pertaining to the meaning of Christ in terms of human experience. The images in these films can speak to the Church, but because they are contrived rather than real, they do not represent viable symbols in the sense which has been proposed in this study. Their value is in their attempt to present to the Christian community fundamental truths about Christ in such a manner that one sees as well as hears the claims of the gospel. This they accomplish, but they are not symbols because

they have no reality in terms of the existential need and no inherent participation in that which they present. In this sense, they are effective signs rather than symbols.

I mentioned previously in this chapter that the Church is not without christological symbols. Unfortunately, these are most often ignored, misused, or deprived of their real power as such. The cross is one such symbol. Langer speaks of it in terms of a "charged" symbol.

Many symbols--not only words, but other forms--may be said to be "charged" with meanings. They have many symbolic and signfic functions, and these functions have been integrated into a complex so that they are all apt to be sympathetically invoked with any chosen one. The cross is such a charged symbol: the actual instrument of Christ's death, hence a symbol of suffering; first laid on his shoulders, an actual burden, as well as a product of human handiwork, and on both grounds a symbol of his accepted moral burden; . . . It is charged with meanings, all human and emotional and vaguely cosmic, so that they have become integrated into a connotation of the whole religious drama--sin, suffering and redemption.²⁷

Langer further suggests that there is a specific reason for its value as a symbol.

Yet undoubtedly the cross owes much of its value to the fact that *it has the physical attributes of a good symbol*: it is easily made--drawn on paper, set up in wood or stone, fashioned of precious substance as an amulet, even traced recognizably with a finger, in a ritual gesture.²⁸

However, for many Christians the cross as a symbol has essentially deteriorated to the state of a "sign." Many view it as an end in itself and cannot see through it to the reality and truth which it expresses. It has lost its transparency and become in actuality a "religious

²⁷Ibid., p. 239.

²⁸Ibid., p. 240.

object" rather than the objectification of a religious truth. I do not know whether or not the cross can regain its original significance as a christological symbol. Yet, such a "rebirth" may be possible if and when we begin to understand once more what the cross' function is in terms of our faith and how it accomplishes this. It may be possible if and when we learn to utilize the cross, not as a conventional religious decoration, but as a vehicle through which God confronts us and communicates with us.

However, there is a second symbol for Christ, which although it also has lost power as such in recent years, may still have potential as a viable symbol. The symbol to which I refer is that of the eucharistic Bread. "Bread" in this sense is usually regarded only in terms of the sacramental elements, particularly in its association with the Last Supper. It does have some inherent sacrificial and crucifixion aspects as a reference to the "body of Christ which is broken for you." However, in the Protestant Churches especially this sacrificial aspect has, to a considerable degree, been obviated and replaced with the understanding of the sacrament as a "memorial." Yet, there is a further dimension in which the bread may function as a symbol for Christ. It is indicative of the fundamental Christian claim for Christ as the "Life-Giver" and the "Source of Life." Moreover, if the six criteria established above are applied to this "Bread-symbol," a positive correlation between the symbol and its symbolized referent is revealed. Bread is a real symbol, it reflects real needs within the contemporary community and it can be applied simply and consistently. It is capable

of including more than one level of understanding without losing its fundamental direction and it is understandable in terms of the present experience and the past traditions of the community. Finally, it is directed and validated by the witness of the Christian faith and is not a distortion or violation of its essential claims. In addition, it already has a place in the life of the contemporary Church and is already a part of its life style. Usually, its symbolic power is virtually ignored by the Church and this is a real mistake.

Robinson's experiment at Clare College is a good indication of how the process of "restoring" a symbol to its inherent power may take place.²⁹ There are several important insights provided by his study, but I wish to direct attention to one in particular. This is the re-affirmation of the symbolic power of the eucharistic elements. The community at Clare learned to provide these elements from their own resources; the bread from their table and the wine from their cellar. It was a conscious action on their part and, most importantly, they knew why they were doing it. The eucharistic service affirms that there is a fundamental relationship which exists between what is present in our lives and what appears on the Lord's table. So it is said, but everything that is usually done in the ritual itself seems to deny this. People hear what is said, but what they remember is what they see. "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all

²⁹John A. T. Robinson, Liturgy Coming to Life (London: Mowbray, 1960), pp. 3-49.

partake of the one bread." (I Corinthians 10:17). What has this to do with the "nicely diced" pieces of bread, or worse yet, those "officially stamped" wafers that appear on many altars. Christ as the eucharistic Bread is also he who makes us one and the bread itself may actually and visibly symbolize this for us. Robinson explains the significance in their use of the "common elements."

It was but a symbol of the fact that the samples we offer must genuinely stand for *our* lives, as a community and as individuals; otherwise it is not our real selves that we are asking Christ to deal with and to consecrate as the materials of his kingdom.³⁰

Here is a visual symbol of incarnational theology and christological truth, in visibility, Christ becomes the "Bread of Life."

One may argue that the symbol "Bread" is not adequate because it does not refer to Christ and his work in several significant ways. What of Christ as "teacher" or as "healer" or as "redeemer"? Yet that is precisely the point I have been trying to make. It is the fundamental lesson which both the New Testament and catacomb art has to teach us. One christological symbol does not have to include *all* christological truth, so long as that truth to which it does testify is authentic and real. This is the primary foundation on which a symbolic approach to christology is built.

This study has attempted to provide the basis for such an approach. It has examined and discussed three specific christological symbols from the perspectives of their backgrounds and expressions. It

³⁰Ibid., pp. 34-35.

has suggested reasons as to why these were authentic symbols for the Christ as he was known in the early Christian community. It has proposed a means by which the contemporary Christian community may more fully utilize its own christological symbols and expressions, and it has laid the groundwork for a symbolic understanding of Christ. Finally it has suggested a direction in which the Church might utilize this understanding. The burden is on the present Christian community.

The symbolic approach is viable and valuable. It has the potential to present christology through levels of experience and reality which are other than intellectual in their orientation. There is a quality of totality in such presentations which may speak to the "whole" man and not to his mind alone. It has the capacity to provide visual references for the invisible and secular images for the Holy so that the "Transcendent Unconditional" becomes immanent and present in human experience.

It is the natural consequence of God's own act worked out in the fabric of contemporary existence. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." It is in our christological symbols that this "Word" is continually and visibly given "flesh."

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